Between the Mountain and the Mine: Essays on Land, Emigration, and Identity from Connaught to County Durham

Michael McManus

Cover image: Lough Meelagh from Kilronan Mountain

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In honour of my great great Grandparents,
Elizabeth and James McManus, past residents of Kilronan Parish, County Roscommon.

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Foreword

There is a lane above the village of Keadue in north County Roscommon, lined with honeysuckle and blackthorn, that climbs towards Kilronan Mountain (Sliabh Chill Rónáin). I first walked it in the summer of 1985 with my sister Kathleen on my first visit to our McManus ancestral family home. As I stepped from our car outside the old presbytery, I felt an immediate connection. Neither of us spoke. Walking up the lane, I felt as if the past had come alive. After nearly 150 years away, our McManus family had come home. This book begins with that moment.

The McManus family of Kilronan Parish did not leave Ireland willingly. The estate records of Edward King Tenison list the 1847 emigration in careful detail, ending with one haunting entry: "Paid for hasps and staples for deserted homes." Those houses were locked and never opened again. My great-great-grandparents, James McManus and Elizabeth Kelly, never returned. Their young sons, John and Thomas, reached County Durham alone. This book is dedicated to James, Elizabeth, and the world they lost.

These essays are based on parliamentary papers, estate records, census returns, church records, and the archives of Durham County Record Office. They explore the O'Conor dynasty, the Arigna coal and iron district, pre-Famine Connaught, the Land League, Lord Leitrim, Kilronan Parish, and the Irish families who settled in Crook and Billy Row, County Durham. They follow the methods of academic history, with full references and notes but they are also a family story. The story stretches from Kilronan Mountain to the coal mines and coke ovens of Crook, where John McManus built a new life. Across the Irish Sea and through the nineteenth century, it links the last Kings of Connaught with Durham City.

In 2024, Family Tree DNA confirmed what medieval records had long claimed: the McManus family of Kilronan and the royal O'Conors of Connaught share a common paternal ancestor from about 1050 CE. Independent genetic and historical evidence reached the same conclusion. For me, after years of researching both records and DNA, that confirmation gave new meaning to the lane above Keadue. It is not only a beautiful country road, but one that leads back to the kings of Ireland.

On that first visit to Keadue in 1985, Father Masterson welcomed Kathleen and me, saying simply, "Yours is a great name here." He later gave me a copy of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady's 1981 Rededication Booklet. It became one of the richest sources used in this book, preserving memories of Keadue, its people, and its history.

Kathleen took honeysuckle cuttings from the lane that day. They still grow in our garden in England: a small piece of Kilronan rooted in Durham, reflecting the lasting bond between the McManus family and its past.

Michael McManus
Durham City, 2026

PART ONE

Dynasty and Landscape

Genes and Septs: History, Genetics, and the Connection between the McManus Family of Kilronan and the Royal House of O'Conor of Connaught

I. A Rare Connection: The Family Tree DNA Report

In the age of genetic genealogy, propositions that once rested entirely on annalistic record and genealogical tradition can now be tested against the evidence of the human chromosome. In 2024, a report generated through the Family Tree DNA platform presented the author with a result of unusual historical weight. Under the entry for O'Conor House; the genetic profile maintained by the O'Conor family, direct descendants of the Kings of Connaught and of the last High King of Ireland, the following was recorded: shared paternal line ancestor, approximately 1050 CE. Rare connection: 1 in 27,000. Only twenty-seven customers in the entire Family Tree DNA database are recorded as this closely related to O'Conor House. This essay sets out what that finding means, how it is supported by the historical and genealogical record, and what it tells us about the deep roots of the McManus family of Kilronan Parish, County Roscommon, whose story is the subject of this volume.[1]

The connection the report identifies is not a distant or speculative one. A shared common paternal ancestor around 1050 CE places the point of divergence between the O'Conor and McManus male lines squarely within the lifetime of Turlough Mór O'Conor (1088–1156), High King of

[1]Family Tree DNA, O'Conor House Report (familytreedna.com). The shared paternal ancestor is dated to approximately 1050 CE, placing the common origin within the era of Turlough Mór O'Conor (1088–1156). Only twenty-seven customers in the entire Family Tree DNA database are recorded as this closely related to the O'Conor House entry.

Ireland, whose son Maghnus O'Conor of Tir Thuathail is recorded in the annals as the ancestor of the McManus sept of north Roscommon. The Family Tree DNA report notes explicitly: 'Another son of Turlough Mór O'Conor was Maghnus (d. 1181), the ancestor of one of the two McManus septs of Ireland.' The genetic record and the historical record are, in this case, saying precisely the same thing, in the language of their respective disciplines.

II. Two Families, One Name: Distinguishing the McManus Septs

The Irish surname McManus is an anglicised form of the Gaelic MacMaghnuis, meaning 'son of Magnus.' The personal name Magnus is ultimately derived from the Latin magnus — 'great' — popularised across northern Europe and Ireland through admiration for Charlemagne (Carolus Magnus), and carried northward by Norse settlers from whom it passed to Shetland, Scotland, and Ireland, where it became Manus. The surname thus denotes the son of Manus, and its spread reflects both the Norse influence on medieval Gaelic Ireland and the deliberate naming of sons in honour of distinguished ancestors.

It is essential, from the outset, to distinguish the two distinct McManus families whose existence the historical record attests. The name designates genealogically from two separate individuals called Maghnus: Maghnus Maguire of County Fermanagh in Ulster, ancestor of the Fermanagh McManuses, and Maghnus O'Conor of North County Roscommon in Connaught, ancestor of the Kilronan McManuses with whom this essay is concerned. This distinction was established definitively by Edward MacLysaght, formerly Chief Herald of Ireland and Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, in his seminal study of

Irish surnames, where he concurs that the two families are 'distinct and mutually exclusive' in genealogical origin. The essay that follows is concerned exclusively with the Connaught McManuses.[2]

III. The Historical Record: From O'Conor to McManus in the Annals

Historical foundation for the connection between the McManus family and the O'Conor dynasty rests principally on two great annalistic compilations: the Annals of the Four Masters, compiled between 1632 and 1636 under the direction of the Franciscan scholar Michael O'Clery and translated by John O'Donovan in 1856, and the Annals of Lough Cé, which describe events between 1014 and 1590 and were copied principally by the O'Duignan family of Kilronan on behalf of the MacDermot family. Both sets of annals, independently and consistently, record the genealogical connection between the O'Conors of Connaught and the McManus family of Tir Thuathail.

The chain of descent is set out with precision in the Book of Lecan[3] and corroborated by the 'Four Masters.' The McManuses of north Roscommon are descended from Conor, King of Connaught, who reigned seven years and died in 973 CE. From him descended Turlough Mór O'Conor, the forty-eighth King of Connaught and the one hundred and eighty-first elected Monarch of all Ireland, who came to the throne in

[2]MacLysaght, E. (1978), Surnames of Ireland (Dublin: Irish Academy Press), p. 222. MacLysaght, formerly Chief Herald of Ireland and Chairman of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, establishes clearly that the two McManus families — of Fermanagh and of Roscommon — are 'distinct and mutually exclusive' in their genealogical origins.
[3]Annals of the Four Masters [hereafter AFM], cited in O'Donovan and O'Conor (1891), p. 30: 'From this Conor, the family name of O'Conor has arisen, his descendants being called O'Conor, or the sons, or descendants, of Conor.'

1136 and died in 1156 after fifty years of rule, twenty as High King.[4] Turlough Mór had several wives and eighteen sons. The ninth son was Maghnus O'Conor of Tir Thuathail; the territory in the north-eastern portion of the barony of Boyle in County Roscommon, now identified as the Parish of Kilronan, whose sons, in the year 1225, took the surname MacManus.[5] Maghnus's brother Cathal the Red-handed (Cathal Crobhdearg, 1153–1224) was the fifty-eighth King of Connaught after him. In 1186 the McManus family was established in the territory known as Tir Thuathail, which takes its name from Tuathal Maelgarbh, Monarch of Ireland from 533 to 544.[6]

The name Tir Thuathail is preserved in the place-name Keadue itself; from the Irish Céide Tíre Thuathail, the 'green hill of Tir Thuathail', the very village where the author's great-grandfather John McManus was born, and where his baptism record was found in the Kilronan Parish register. The land on which the McManus family lived for centuries, and from which they emigrated to County Durham in the middle of the nineteenth century, was the precise territory granted to their ancestor Maghnus O'Conor nine centuries before.

[4]AFM, cited in O'Donovan and O'Conor (1891). Byrne, F. J. (1973), Irish Kings and High Kings (London: Batsford), p. 301, sets out the O'Conor Kings of Connaught from 925 to Roderic's deposition from the High Kingship by the Treaty of Windsor, 1175.
[5]The Book of Lecan, fol. 72, b, col. 4, cited in O'Donovan, J. and O'Conor, C.O. (1891), The O'Conors of Connaught: An Historical Memoir (Dublin; reprinted Biblio Bazaar, 2010), p. 44: 'Turlough had…by which of his wives it is not stated…Manus, ancestor of the Clanmanus.'
[6]O'Faherty, Ogygia Part 3, Column 93, cited in McManus, M. (2011), 'Genes and Septs Reunited' (unpublished paper). Tir-Tuathail gets its name from Tuathal Maelgarbh, Monarch of Ireland from 533 to 544.

IV. A Chronicle of Battles: The McManuses in the Annals, 1181–1495

The annals preserve a remarkable chronicle of McManus activity across nearly three centuries, sufficient to establish the family's presence, status, and territorial continuity in Kilronan with exceptional clarity. The record begins with the death of Manus O'Conor himself in 1181. By 1249 the McManus designation was settled in the annals: Brian An Doire MacManus, son of Manus O'Conor, was killed fighting against the English as part of the forces of Connaught marching on Athenry in County Galway. Three generations of the family are recorded fighting alongside and sometimes against their O'Conor cousins in the feuds and battles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[7]

The most disastrous moment for both families came at the Battle of Athenry in 1316, when Melaghlin Oge MacManus and many others were slain fighting under Felim O'Conor, King of Connaught, against the Anglo-Norman forces.[8] The annals record further family feuding across the fourteenth century, with McManuses killed in the conflicts between rival O'Conor and MacDermot factions in 1308, 1315, 1318, and 1363. In 1460, the last great episode before the family's disappearance from the annals, Rory, son of Owen Roe MacManus, Lord of Tir Thuathail, was slain defending his territory against O'Donnell's men, who had come to

[7]AFM, s.a. 1249: 'Brian An Doire MacManus, son of Manus O'Conor, was killed fighting against the English and was one of the army led by the Roydamnas of Connaught, Turlough and Hugh, to Athenry on Lady Day in mid-autumn, to burn and plunder it.'

[8]AFM, s.a. 1316, cited in O'Donovan and O'Conor (1891). The battle was fought on the festival day of St Lawrence, 10 August. Felim O'Conor was twenty-three years of age at the time. 'It is impossible to enumerate or tell all the chiefs of Connaught, Munster, and Meath, who fell in this battle.'

steal his cattle; after the killing of MacManus, the annals record, 'the chiefs of the Clann Manus deprived them of their preys in that valley.' By 1495 the last- named death of a McManus lord of Tir Thuathail is recorded in the Four Masters[9]: Manus, son of Owen Roe MacManus. The McManus pedigree is not preserved with any certainty beyond the eighteenth century.[10]

V. Dispossession, Plantation, and Survival: The McManus Story, 1585–1847

The progressive dispossession of the Gaelic families of north Roscommon across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is documented with painful precision in the records of the Composition of Connaught (1585), the Patent Rolls of James I, and the Cromwellian land settlements of the 1650s. The Composition of 1585 established a rental basis for landownership across Connaught in place of the older Gaelic arrangements, and while ninety-one freeholders in Boyle Barony received Letters Patent from James I confirming their title, including eight McManuses at Crosbane, Drumsillagh, Ardcallen, Lurgan, Glentawlaght, and Tawlaght, those patents were subsequently declared void when the London clerks forgot to enrol the freeholders in the register. The result was catastrophic. Of ninety-two native freeholders in Boyle Barony in 1617, only sixty-one remained by 1641, and after the Cromwellian

[9]AFM, s.a. 1460: 'Mac Manus of Tir-Tuathail, Rory, the son of Owen Roe Mac Manus, fully worthy to be Lord of that territory, was slain by Con, the son of Niall Garv, son of Turlough-an-Fhiona O'Donnell, and Teige, the son of Teige O'Rourke, while in pursuit of the spoils of the territory.'

[10]Southeran, C. (1871), Genealogical Memoranda Relating to the Family Southeron of Counties Durham, Northumberland, York etc. and the Sept of MacManus (London: Taylor and Company), p. 73. The MacManus pedigree in Tir-Tuathail is not preserved beyond the eighteenth century.

settlement the number had contracted to eleven. By 1660 there were no McManus landowners recorded in the barony at all.

Among those caught up in the regime's violence was Turlough Oge MacManus of Kilronan, hanged at Croghan in 1586 even as a pardon arrived for him: the pardon was simply ignored. The statistics of landownership tell their own story of dispossession:

Table 1
Landowners in Boyle Barony, 1617–1660

Family	1617	1641	1660	Notes
MacDermots	25	23	8	
MacDermot Roes	19	3	1	
MacManus	7	9	0	Extinguished
MacMorrishes	11	10	0	Extinguished
MacCormac	3	4	0	Extinguished
O'Duignans	2	1	0	Extinguished
O'Leadans	5	5	0	Extinguished

Source: Boyle Barony land records; Patent Rolls of James I (1617); Census of Ireland (1659).

The sadness of the Famine and the emigration that followed between 1845 and 1855 completed the displacement that the Cromwellian settlement had begun. If one compares the Tithe Applotment Books of 1825 with Griffith's Valuation of 1855 and the parish registers, it is sadly obvious that by 1855 many individual McManus families no longer existed in the area; the majority having emigrated or died. Among those who did not survive The Famine was the author's great-great-grandfather James McManus and his wife Elizabeth, née Kelly, of Kilronan Parish.

Their son John, my great grandfather, arrived in County Durham at approximately the age of ten, around 1850, parentless, with his brother Thomas.

VI. A Return to Kilronan: Personal Memory and the Recovery of Roots

In the summer of 1985, the author and his sister Kathleen made the first of what would become, for the author, several visits to Kilronan Parish. The account that follows is drawn from the personal memoir written after those visits, which forms an important part of the family archive this volume draws upon:

> I make no excuse for my emotional feelings on that day. It was an extraordinary feeling as I stepped from the car outside the old presbytery in the village of Keadue. Hairs suddenly stood erect on the back of my neck and butterflies inhabited my stomach. Beside me, I sensed my sister Kath was experiencing something similar — but still we managed to retain our composure, resisting an urge to explode into discursive emotion. Yet this was no horrific experience; no encounter with an evil spectre from the past. As we walked quietly upwards and away from the village of Keadue, along the lane hedged with honeysuckle and blackthorn, a spiritual sense of déjà vu pervaded my imagination and the lane became vivid with family spirits from the past. After nearly a century and a half of absence, our McManuses had returned again

to our ancient home of Kilronan.[11]

During that visit and those that followed, the evidence that had been built up over years of research in Durham was confirmed in the most direct possible way: the baptism record of John McManus was found in the Kilronan Parish register, confirming his father as James McManus and his mother as Elizabeth, née Kelly. In the 1871 Census at Crook, County Durham, John had stated he was born in the village of Keadue; his brother Thomas had given his birthplace as Ballyfarnan, approximately one mile north-west of Keadue. In 1866 John had married Bridget Kearns in Durham. Bridget was from Boyle north Roscommon. In 1869 it seems the couple left Durham with their three small children, returning to County Roscommon where they evidently intended to settle. While there, their son Thomas was born in Boyle and baptised in the Catholic Chapel. For whatever reason, the return proved unsustainable; and by 1871 John and Bridget and their family were back in Crook, County Durham, where they spent the rest of their days.[12]

Tenison's emigration account books, preserved in the estate records, reveal something of the circumstances in which John and others had left. They were organised with military precision: passengers transported to

[11]McManus, M. (c.1985–2000), 'From Irish Kings: A Note on the Noble and Ancient Clan McManus of North Roscommon, Ireland' (unpublished memoir, Durham City). The author and his sister Kath made their first visit to Kilronan in 1985. John McManus's baptism record was found in the Kilronan Parish register, confirming his father as James McManus and his mother as Elizabeth, née Kelly. See also: McManus, M. (2023) Genes and Septs Reunited: History and Genetics Synthesized in the Families of McManus and O'Conor of Connaught, Ireland. Independently published.

[12]1871 Census, Crook, County Durham; cited in McManus, 'From Irish Kings.' John McManus stated his birthplace as Keadue; his brother Thomas stated his birthplace as Ballyfarnan, approximately one mile north-west of Keadue.

Sligo for the boat, supplied with flour, meal, oatmeal, rice, and sugar, the cost borne by the landlord. The last line of the account is the most poignant in the entire archive: 'Paid for hasps and staples for deserted homes: £0.6.8.' The homes that were locked up behind the departing emigrants were never reopened. [13]

But the family, as the events of 1869 and the visits of 1985 and after demonstrate, never entirely left. A chance encounter with Father Masterson outside the old presbytery at Keadue on the day of the first visit produced a remark that has stayed with the family ever since: 'Yours is a great name here.' Kath took cuttings of honeysuckle from the hedgerow that day and they later took root in the garden back in England and became 'Kilronan in Durham"; a living emblem of the connection between the two places that this volume is written to explore.

VII. The Scientific Evidence: YDNA and the McManus–O'Conor Connection

The historical record set out in the previous sections, rests, as all such records must, on documentary sources compiled by human writers operating within specific political and cultural contexts. The challenge articulated by the anthropologist Krader; that 'genealogy is at once ideology and history', is a real one. No annalist writes from a position of pure objectivity. The introduction of DNA evidence into genealogical research over the past two decades has provided a means of testing the

[13]McManus, 'From Irish Kings.' The Tenison emigration account book entry reads: 'Paid for hasps and staples for deserted homes: £0.6.8.' See also the essay 'Industry, Idleness, and the Infrastructure of Isolation' and the discussion of E. K. Tenison's estate management in this volume.

documentary record against a form of evidence that is, in an important sense, ideologically neutral: the human Y-chromosome, passed from father to son across the generations, accumulating mutations at a measurable rate, and preserving within its sequence a record of patrilineal descent that is independent of any written source.

A study of Y-chromosomal diversity in Ireland by Emmeline Hill and colleagues, published in 2000, provided the genetic context within which the McManus–O'Conor connection can be understood. The study found that haplogroup 1 chromosomes — the putative pre-Neolithic western European variant — reached their highest frequency anywhere in Ireland or Britain in Connaught, at 98.3 per cent. The western province, isolated by geography and history from the demographic movements that had reshaped the genetic profile of eastern Ireland, Britain, and mainland Europe, preserved what the study described as 'the putative pre-Neolithic western European variant' at a level of near-fixation.[14] Kilronan Parish, in the northernmost tip of County Roscommon at the meeting of three counties, and described by Charles O'Conor in 1773 as a population of remarkable cultural stasis that had resisted agricultural improvement and showed no inclination to change its ancient ways, is located precisely within this genetically distinctive Connaught heartland.

A further study at Trinity College Dublin, conducted by McEvoy and colleagues in 2004, identified a concentrated area in the north-west of Ireland where 21.5 per cent of men tested carried a genetic fingerprint

[14]Hill, E. W., Jobling, M. A., and Bradley, D. G. (2000), 'Y-chromosome variation and Irish origins', Nature, 404, pp. 351–352. The study found that haplogroup 1 chromosomes — the putative pre-Neolithic western European variant — reached their highest frequency in Connaught at 98.3%.

traceable to a single individual: Niall of the Nine Hostages, fifth-century King of Ireland. The ancestral Niáll haplotype is characterised by the marker signature;
13…25…14…11…11…13…12…12…12…13…14…29 — a genetic fingerprint whose correlation with the McManus testers and with O'Conor Don was subsequently established in the author's own YDNA research.[15]

In a study carried out by the author, seven men named McManus whose origins could be traced, with varying degrees of certainty, to Kilronan Parish, were tested to forty-three YDNA markers. The results were striking. None of the seven testers matched at fewer than 40 of the 43 markers. Two pairs achieved perfect 43/43 matches — consistent with a very close recent relationship, as between father and son with no non-paternal event. When the seven McManus testers were compared with O'Conor Don at 34 markers, the closest matches stood at 32/34, classified by Family Tree DNA as 'Related.' The most divergent pair stood at 29/34 — 'Possibly Related' at the standard scale, but interpreted in the context of a thousand years of documented genealogy and the separately established kinship of all seven testers as belonging to a higher category of relationship overall.[16]

[15]McEvoy, B., Richards, M., Forster, P. and Bradley, G. (2004), 'The Longue Durée of Genetic Ancestry: Multiple Genetic Marker Systems and Celtic Origins on the Atlantic Facade of Europe', The American Journal of Human Genetics, 75/4. The Niall ancestral fingerprint is characterized by the following twelve-marker signature: 13 25 14 11 11 13 12 12 12 13 14 29.
[16]McManus, M. (2011), 'Genes and Septs Reunited: History and Genetics Synthesized in the Families of McManus and O'Conor of Connaught, Ireland' (unpublished paper). The seven testers were drawn from Kilronan Parish and Ireland more broadly. All were tested to forty-three markers; none matched at fewer than 40/43.

The deduced modal haplotype of the seven Kilronan McManuses — the most common marker-value at each position across the seven profiles, representing the probable ancestral genetic signature of Manus O'Conor himself — is an identical match to the ancestral fingerprint of Niáll of the Nine Hostages established by the McEvoy study. The Family Tree DNA Big Y testing of an O'Conor Don line family member, conducted with the assistance of Dr Maurice Gleeson and Tim McEvoy as part of the Sons of Aodh Group Project, identified the R-BY18179 McManus subclade whose age estimate aligns closely with the death of Maghnus O'Conor in 1181. The genetic clock and the annalistic record have arrived, by wholly independent routes, at the same conclusion.[17]

VIII. Conclusion: One Sept, Two Names, and a Thousand Years

The Family Tree DNA report that initiated this essay is, in one sense, a very modern document: generated by a commercial genomics platform, expressed in the statistical language of genetic genealogy, delivered to the author through a digital interface. In another sense it is among the oldest documents in this volume, pointing back through a thousand years of Irish history to a son of a High King who settled in a remote corner of north Roscommon and whose descendants; by taking his name as their own in 1225, created the McManus sept of Tir Thuathail.

The evidence assembled in this essay; annalistic, genealogical, and genetic, converges on a single conclusion: the McManuses of Kilronan and the O'Conors of Connaught are not two families but one sept,

[17]Family Tree DNA, O'Conor House Report; McManus, 'Genes and Septs Reunited.' The existence of the R-BY18179 McManus subclade, with an age estimate aligning well with the death of Maghnus O'Conor in 1181, provides the genetic corroboration for a connection established by the annals and now confirmed by Big Y testing.

divided by the passage of centuries, the introduction of surnames, and the normal process of genetic mutation, but united by a continuous line of patrilineal descent from Turlough Mór O'Conor, High King of Ireland, through his ninth son Maghnus. The historical record has maintained this for nearly eight hundred years. Genetic science has now confirmed it.

For the McManus family of County Durham; descended from John McManus of Keadue, who arrived in Crook as a parentless child of ten in the aftermath of the Great Famine, and whose parents, Elizabeth and James McManus, to whose memory this volume is dedicated once farmed the lands of Tir Thuathail granted to their ancestor Maghnus O'Conor nine centuries before, this is not merely an academic proposition. It is the deepest thread in the story this book has tried to tell. As the man in the pub in Arigna told the journalist from the Leitrim Guardian[18], when asked about the persistence of the McManus name in a district from which so many others had vanished: 'Where are the Cootes? There are more McManuses in Arigna now than ever there were.'

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[18]Watson, F., Leitrim Guardian, quoted in McManus, 'From Irish Kings': 'The lights in the mountainside and valley homes are reassuring proof that a remarkable community has survived dispossession, plantation, evictions and emigration. The dispossessed destroyed Sir Charles Coote's ironworks in 1641. All McManus land was distributed to the Coote Family, yet as the man in the pub proudly said, "Where are the Cootes? There are more McManuses in Arigna now than ever there were."'

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The O'Conors of Connaught Kingship, Dispossession, and Survival in an Irish Dynasty

I. Introduction

Few Irish families can claim a documented continuity as long or as well attested as that of the O'Conors of Connaught. From a king who gave the family its surname in the tenth century, through two centuries in which O'Conors held the High Kingship of Ireland itself, through the long medieval contest with Anglo-Norman lordship, the catastrophic confiscations of the seventeenth century, and the slow climb back toward civil existence under the Penal Laws, the O'Conor story offers a single connected thread running through the whole of Irish history. *The O'Conors of Connaught*, compiled from the unfinished manuscript of the great Irish antiquarian John O'Donovan and completed and published by Charles Owen O'Conor, the O'Conor Don, traces this thread across twenty-eight chapters and a substantial body of appendices — chancery inquisitions, depositions, letters patent, and genealogical tables — that ground the family narrative in primary documentary evidence rather than legend alone.[1] This essay is a summary essay of O'Donovan and O'Conor's work.

The essay offers a chronological summary of that work, drawn from a close reading of its principal chapters. It follows the family from its first historically ancestor in the tenth century to the achievement of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the death of Owen O'Conor Don in 1831, the point at which the printed narrative closes. Three movements structure

[1]John O'Donovan and Charles Owen O'Conor (The O'Conor Don), The O'Conors of Connaught (Dublin, 1891).

the story: first, the rise of the O'Conors to the kingship of Connaught and, briefly, of all Ireland; second, the long medieval and early modern process by which that kingship was first contested, then formally extinguished, and the family reduced to landed gentry under the Crown; and third, the catastrophic dispossession of the seventeenth century followed by the family's slow re-emergence, through scholarship and political leadership, as champions of the Catholic cause in the era of Charles O'Conor of Belanagare and his descendants.

II. Origins and the Naming of a Dynasty

The book's authors are candid about the difficulty of their undertaking. As the O'Conor Don writes in his introduction, a full and adequate history of the O'Conors "would, if fully and adequately treated, be nothing less, in the earlier periods, than a History of Ireland, and, at a later date, a History of the Kingdom of Connaught."[2] The family's chiefs were monarchs of Ireland before and during the English invasion, and English sovereigns themselves continued to recognise the O'Conors as "Kings" of Connaught for generations after 1171. The materials for such a history were never lacking — the Irish Annals, the authors noted, "abound in most detailed information as to the family history, succession, and pedigrees"[3] — but no accurate and connected account had been published before O'Donovan undertook the task, late in his life, at the urging of the family.

The opening chapters trace the O'Conor pedigree back through the conventional schema of early Irish history: the legendary colonisations of

[2]O'Conor Don, introduction to The O'Conors of Connaught, p. xix.
[3]Ibid.

Ireland, the descendants of Heremon, and the great division of the island between Conn of the Hundred Battles and Eoghan Mor (Leath Cuinn and Leath Mogha) in the second century. The authors are careful, in the spirit of O'Donovan's scholarship, to distinguish between bardic tradition and verifiable record, citing Camden's caution that no historian can be wholly sure of his footing "in the foggy, dark sea of antiquity."[4] From Conn's line the narrative follows the kings of Connaught — a province whose ruling families included the O'Rourkes as well as the ancestors of the O'Conors — down to the reign of Cathal, son of Conor, in the tenth century.

The decisive moment for the family's identity comes with Conor (Conchobhar), son of Teige, who recovered the sovereignty of Connaught for his line in 968 after a period in which it had passed to the O'Rourkes, and who died in 971. "From this Concovar, or Conor," O'Donovan explains, "the family name of O'Conor has arisen, his descendants being called O'Conor, or the sons, or descendants, of Conor."[5] O'Donovan traces the philology of the name with characteristic precision: written in Irish as *O'Conchobhair*, anglicised variously over the centuries as O'Conquovar, O'Conogher, O'Knogher, O'Konnor, O'Conner, O'Connor, and O'Conor, with the modern form settling into use over the last three centuries. The Irish *Conchobhair* signifies "a hero or champion," and the family motto — *O Dhia gach cu cabrach*, "From God comes every helping hero" — was understood as a deliberate play on this etymology. From Conor's death in 971 the book is able to trace an

[4]William Camden, Britannia, cited in O'Donovan and O'Conor Don, The O'Conors of Connaught, Introduction, p. xx.
[5]O'Donovan, quoted in The O'Conors of Connaught, p. 30.

unbroken line of named, dated successions, each referenced to the Annals of the Four Masters and the *Chronicum Scotorum*.[6]

III. The Rise to the Kingship of Connaught and of Ireland

The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw the O'Conors rise from provincial kings to the most powerful dynasty in Ireland. Turlough Mor ("the Great"), son of Rory, became King of Connaught in 1106 and spent his long reign aspiring to, and substantially achieving, the high-kingship of the whole island. The narrative traces his wars against the kings of Munster and the O'Briens, his installation of his own son as King of Meath, and his patronage of the church — the building works at Tuam Cathedral, the chancel arch and high cross that survive there, the Cross of Cong, and works at Clonmacnoise — and even his establishment of a mint, a striking indicator of the administrative sophistication of his kingship. Turlough Mor's reign represents the high-water mark of O'Conor secular and ecclesiastical patronage before the Anglo-Norman period.

His son Roderic (Ruaidrí) succeeded as King of Connaught on Turlough's death in 1156, though the high-kingship of Ireland passed for a time to Muirchertach MacLochlainn of the northern Hy Niall. The book's account of Roderic's rise is attentive to the precariousness of high-kingship in this period: authority depended on a constantly renewed cycle of hostings, hostage-taking, and the subduing of rival provincial kings rather than on any settled constitutional principle. When MacLochlainn was killed in an insurrection of his own subjects in 1166,

[6]Annals of the Four Masters and Chronicum Scotorum, cited throughout The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapters I–III.

Roderic was recognised, with comparatively little contention, as Ard-Rí — monarch of all Ireland.

It was during Roderic's reign that the central rupture of medieval Irish history occurred. Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster, had earlier abducted the wife of Tiernan O'Rourke, prince of Breifne, and the resulting enmity drove him to seek aid abroad. The book narrates Dermot's flight to England, his appeal to Henry II then in France, and Dermot's subsequent recruitment of Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke — Strongbow — along with the Fitzgerald and Fitzstephen kinsmen, on the promise of his daughter Eva's hand and the succession to Leinster. The narrative is candid about Roderic's misjudgement of the crisis: when the first parties of Anglo-Norman adventurers landed and began to restore Dermot's position in Leinster, "the curse of all Irish counsels" — disunion among the provincial kings — repeatedly prevented an effective combined response.

The book gives a vivid, source-grounded account of the subsequent events: the marriage of Strongbow to Eva and his assumption of the claim to Leinster on Dermot's death in 1171; the capture of Waterford and Dublin; the siege in which the Hiberno-Norse leader Hasculph declared defiantly that "we came hither with only a small force, and this is but the beginning of our labours, and far other and greater things shall follow."[7] Roderic's own siege of Anglo-Norman Dublin, conducted with the support of fleets from the Isle of Man, nonetheless failed when the Irish host settled into a two-month blockade rather than pressing an

[7]O'Donovan and O'Conor Don, The O'Conors of Connaught, p. 43.

assault. Believing the city's surrender to be imminent through negotiation, Roderic had grown careless, drawing off part of his own forces to forage elsewhere. It was at this precise moment of overconfidence that Strongbow's small garrison, "animated by despair," made a sudden sally and took the Irish troops entirely by surprise. "From the effects of this disaster," the book records, "the Irish cause never afterwards recovered."

The authors are equally attentive to their critical method: Giraldus Cambrensis's claim that Roderic himself was present at the moment of the sally and narrowly escaped after losing his right hand to an Anglo-Norman knight is weighed and rejected outright, the authors noting drily that so significant an event "would certainly be recorded in the annals," and that its absence from the Irish sources is sufficient to convict the Cambro-Norman chronicler of exaggeration.[8]

The arrival of Henry II himself in Ireland in 1171, the submission of most Irish kings and chieftains to him, and the eventual Treaty of Windsor in 1175 — by which Roderic was recognised as King of Connaught and as overlord of the unconquered Irish, while ceding the conquered territories and ultimate dominance to Henry — together mark the negotiated, rather than purely military, character of the Anglo-Norman settlement of Ireland. The book also documents the role of the church in legitimising the invasion: the Bull of Pope Adrian IV (*Laudabiliter*) and its confirmation by Pope Alexander III were formally

[8]Giraldus Cambrensis, Expugnatio Hibernica, discussed and refuted in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter V.

published in Ireland in 1175.[9]

Roderic's later years were marked by the steady attrition of his authority: risings among his own sons, the ambitions of Hugh de Lacy, a slow contraction of effective O'Conor power to Connaught itself. The book records Roderic's eventual retirement to the abbey of Cong, his abdication, and his death there in 1198, alongside the death in 1180 of Laurence O'Toole, Archbishop of Dublin, whose deathbed lament — "Ah! foolish and senseless people, what is now to become of you? Who will now cure your misfortunes?" — the authors quote as an epitaph for the political collapse the invasion had set in motion.[10]

IV. The Medieval Lordship: Kings Without a Kingdom

The chapters covering the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries form one of the longest and, narratively, most repetitive sections of the book, and the repetition is itself instructive. Following Roderic, the O'Conor kingship of Connaught continued in name and in substantial local power, but it was now exercised under increasing pressure from two directions: the Anglo-Norman lordship of the de Burgh (Burke) family, who had been granted the nominal lordship of Connaught by the English Crown, and from internal rivalry within the O'Conor kindred itself, which fractured during this period into the rival lines of O'Conor Don and O'Conor Roe.

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[9]Bull of Pope Adrian IV (Laudabiliter) and confirmation by Pope Alexander III, published in Ireland 1175; cited in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter V.

[10]Laurence O'Toole, Archbishop of Dublin, deathbed lament, 1180; quoted in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter VI.

Chapter after chapter recounts the same essential pattern: a king inaugurated at the traditional site, his early conflicts with rival cousins or brothers for the kingship, alliances and ruptures with the de Burghs, English-sponsored castle-building at strategic sites such as Athlone, Roscommon, and Galway, and a death followed by a fresh succession dispute. Cathal Crovedearg ("Red-handed"), illegitimate or putative son of Turlough Mor, secured recognition as King of Connaught in the early thirteenth century and was visited by King John; his agreement to the formation of counties in Connaught and his correspondence with King Henry III mark a transitional moment in which O'Conor authority began to be expressed in terms recognisable to English administration. His descendants — Hugh, Felim, Owen, Rory, Hugh Muimhneach, and others — succeeded one another amid chronic warfare, episodes of mutilation and imprisonment among rival kinsmen, and a steady erosion of the kingship's practical authority even as its ceremonial and genealogical prestige persisted.[11]

The book preserves valuable detail on the constitutional forms by which this kingship, however contested, was still conferred. The inauguration of a King of Connaught took place at the traditional site of Carnfree, before "the twelve chiefs and twelve coarbs of Sil Murray," and required the participation of hereditary officers — most notably the chief of the M'Dermots of Moylurg, whose office it was to place the "royal slipper" upon the new king's foot. The book records more than one occasion on which a M'Dermot withheld this service in protest at a disputed succession, having "refused to attend, or to put on the royal slipper,

[11]O'Donovan and O'Conor Don, The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter VIII.

which was his proper office" — a vivid illustration of how thoroughly Gaelic kingship remained bound by customary ritual even as its practical power was being steadily eroded by external conquest and internal division.

A representative passage from the reign of Teige, son of Turlough (1274–1278), captures the character of the period precisely: "The disputes between the different members of the house of O'Conor, which frequently ended in the death of one of the combatants, were not confined to cousins; even brothers were found in deadly hostility to each other."[12] The book does not flinch from this record of internal violence; rather, it presents the cycle of fratricidal succession contests as the central structural weakness that allowed Anglo-Norman, and later English, power to entrench itself in Connaught over the following four centuries, since rival O'Conor claimants repeatedly sought English or de Burgh military support against their own kinsmen, at the price of further concessions of land and authority.

This pattern reached a particularly destructive climax during the Bruce invasion of Ireland (1315–1318), when Edward Bruce's Scottish campaign became directly entangled with a fresh contest for the Connaught kingship between Felim O'Conor and his rival Rory, son of Cathal Roe. The book narrates how Bruce played both sides, authorising Rory to make war on the English while instructing him not to interfere with Felim's own territory. "The fickleness and apparent treachery on the part of the Irish kings and chieftains of those days," the authors write, "at

[12]The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XII (Bruce invasion); cf. Chapters VIII–XVIII passim.

first sight appears inexcusable; but a little consideration of the actual position in which they were placed, and the treatment which they received, may lead us to alter this opinion" — since, as they point out, the English settlers themselves were "ever ready to use the Irish leaders as tools and instruments for destroying each other."[13] The resulting war culminated in the catastrophic Battle of Athenry in 1316, in which the O'Conor forces suffered a defeat so severe that it temporarily cleared the way for a previously marginal claimant, Cathal, son of Donnell, to seize the kingship.

In the aftermath of this slaughter, the territory once ruled by the Kings of Connaught was, "by fiction of English law, divided into two counties, namely, Connaught and Roscommon," separated by a notionally drawn line, with nominal sheriffs appointed despite the fact that "the limits of these counties were undefined."[14] The juxtaposition the book draws here is pointed: even as O'Conor princes continued to fight for a kingship rooted in pre-Christian custom, the English administration was already quietly imposing upon the same territory the abstract, paper geography of the county system that would eventually replace Gaelic lordship altogether.

V. Submission to the Crown: The Composition of Connaught

The sixteenth century brought the final formal transformation of O'Conor lordship into English-style landed tenure. Rather than attempting to exterminate the native chieftains, the Crown's strategy, beginning under Henry VIII, was to conciliate and absorb them — the

[13]Ibid., Chapter XII.
[14]Ibid.

chieftains' traditional rights of governing their subordinates were to be compounded and surrendered, and the lands over which they had exercised direct lordship were to be confirmed to them as individual property held of the Crown, rather than as the shared patrimony of an extended kin-group under Gaelic custom (the system of tanistry and gavelkind succession). This policy of "surrender and regrant" forms the essential context for the career of Sir Hugh "O'Conor Don," son of Dermot, whose long career from 1585 to 1632 the book treats as the decisive transition point at which the head of the family ceased to be, even nominally, an independent Gaelic ruler and became formally a subject and tenant of the English Crown.[15]

The book reproduces, at length, the indenture of 1585 known to historians as the Composition of Connaught, concluded between Sir John Perrot, Lord Deputy, and the lords and chieftains of Moylurg, O'Conor Don's country, and O'Conor Roe's country. Under this agreement the territory — comprising the baronies of Moylurg or Boyle, Ballintobber, and Roscommon, calculated at 906 quarters of land — was converted from Gaelic tribute-render into a fixed annual money rent payable to the Crown, alongside an obligation to furnish armed horsemen and footmen for royal service. It is a document that, in a single transaction, formalises the conversion of an entire Gaelic lordship into the language of Tudor feudal tenure.[16]

[15]Composition of Connaught, 1585; reproduced in full in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XIX and Appendices.
[16]O'Donovan and O'Conor Don, The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XIX.

This is also the chapter in which "O'Conor Don" first appears, definitively, as a fixed family title rather than simply a description of the senior line. Sir Hugh O'Conor Don received letters patent from James I confirming his estates,[17] and for a generation the family's position, though no longer that of kings, was that of substantial and locally powerful Connaught gentry, intermarried with other major Gaelic and Old English families and active in the political and military life of early Stuart Ireland. The question of precedence for the "O'Conor Don" title is separately investigated in the book's appendices by the Irish-language scholar Professor O'Looney.[18]

V1. Confederate War, Cromwellian Confiscation, and the Lowest Ebb

The mid-seventeenth century brought catastrophe. The book traces in close detail — drawing on chancery inquisitions, depositions, and military records reproduced in the appendices — the family's involvement in the wars of the 1640s. Members of the O'Conor Don line took commissions in the Irish Confederate and royalist forces; the book records service in the Duke of Gloucester's regiment, capture and imprisonment, and charges brought against family members. Throughout, the narrative insists on the family's consistent attachment to the Stuart and royalist cause through the Civil Wars, the Cromwellian conquest, and the Restoration — an attachment that the family's later petitions for restitution invoke, and precisely this loyalty that the Cromwellian and

[17]Letters patent of James I; Appendix G, The O'Conors of Connaught.
[18]Appendix C, The O'Conors of Connaught, citing Professor O'Looney on the precedence of the 'O'Conor Don' title.

Restoration settlements alike largely failed to reward.[19]

The consequences of the Cromwellian conquest are narrated unsparingly. The castle and town of Ballintober — the ancestral seat from which the family had taken its territorial identification for centuries — passed by final decree in 1657 to Lord Kilmallock, and thence to Lady Frances Butler, who granted the lands to a transplanted person, James Donnellan, who in turn reassigned them to a Colonel Hugh O'Conor — but only as one claimant among several competing grantees, in a tangle of transplantation, confiscation, and resale that the book traces through the Athlone and Loughrea commissioners' proceedings. Colonel Hugh O'Conor's own petition under the Act of Settlement, seeking restoration of close to 10,000 acres of what had been his family's "profitable land," was referred to the commissioners but left substantially unresolved at his death around 1669.[20]

Denis O'Conor, "Donough a Lia," born in 1674, inherited in this period "little more than a series of vexatious and doubtful lawsuits." His ancestral property had passed into the hands of the Frenches; an Act of 1699 vesting the estates of those attainted of treason in trustees for public sale compounded the family's difficulties still further. The book quotes the relevant statutory language at length, allowing the reader to see exactly how comprehensively the legal architecture of confiscation operated against families in the O'Conors' position — even those, like Denis, too young to have taken any active part in the political struggles

[19]Cromwellian confiscation proceedings, reproduced in Appendices, The O'Conors of Connaught.
[20]The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XXII.

that preceded his majority, and who thus, the text notes pointedly, "escaped attainder" only by accident of age.[21]

V1I. Charles O'Conor of Belanagare and the Recovery of Identity

It is against this background of legal dispossession that the book turns to the figure who represents, in its telling, the family's recovery — not of land, which remained largely unrecoverable, but of public standing, intellectual distinction, and political leadership: Charles O'Conor of Belanagare (1710–1791), grandson of Denis. The book's character sketch of Charles O'Conor is among its most admiring passages. He is described as a reasoner "calm, dispassionate, sometimes eloquent," of "no vanity," whose "entire correspondence breathes the spirit of the public only," and who pursued industry and economy not for personal gain but "as the parents of hospitality and generosity."[22]

The book is equally attentive to O'Conor's scholarly achievement. Possessed of a profound native command of the Irish language and an unmatched capability for deciphering the oldest and most difficult manuscripts, Charles O'Conor dedicated himself from an early age to collecting and preserving Irish manuscript sources — the collection later acquired by Lord Ashburnham and now preserved in the Royal Irish Academy owes its preservation substantially to him — and to annotating and illuminating, through his own scholarship, the historical documents on which the credibility of Irish antiquarian history rested. His published *Dissertations on the Ancient History of Ireland* and his later editorial work on

[21]Ibid.

[22]The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XXIII; character sketch partly composed of a contemporary's tribute.

the early Irish annals were among the first attempts by an Irish Catholic scholar to vindicate the authenticity and historical value of native Irish sources before a sceptical English-speaking readership. In this respect the book situates Charles O'Conor as a direct forerunner of John O'Donovan himself, the very scholar whose unfinished manuscript underlies the present work.[23]

Politically, Charles O'Conor's career coincided with, and substantially shaped, the earliest stirrings of organised Catholic political action under the Penal Laws. The book traces his involvement, alongside figures such as Dr. Curry and Mr. Wyse, in the foundation of the Catholic Association — predecessor to the various Catholic Committees of the later eighteenth century — devoted to seeking the gradual relief of Irish Catholics from civil and political disability. It records the partial successes of this campaign: the relief Acts of the 1770s, which allowed Catholics for the first time in generations to hold land in their own names, to enter into long leases, and to practise their religion without legal hindrance, even as Catholics — "forming the vast majority of the inhabitants of the country" — remained excluded from the franchise, from public office, and from "even the privilege of voting for a Protestant representative."[24]

VI1I. Denis and Owen O'Conor: Toward Emancipation

The book's final chapters trace the careers of Charles O'Conor's son Denis and grandson Owen, who inherited both the headship of the family and the leadership of organised Catholic political effort through the turbulent final decades of the eighteenth century and into the

[23]Ibid.
[24]Ibid., Chapter XXIV.

nineteenth. The narrative situates the family's domestic political activity within the broader currents of the period: the formation of the Irish Volunteer movement and its demands for legislative independence; the increasing nervousness of the Protestant ascendancy about pressing Catholic claims too forcefully; the emergence of more assertive voices, including the Society of United Irishmen formed in Belfast, whose 1791 declaration in favour of "perfect religious and political equality" gave new courage to the Catholic cause;[25] and the close personal and political relationships that developed between Catholic Committee leaders such as John Keogh and radical figures including Wolfe Tone, who served for a period as the Committee's secretary.

The book reproduces correspondence from this period with evident relish for its documentary value — letters between Owen O'Conor and Dr. McKenna, a letter from Charles O'Conor mentioning Tone and Napper Tandy by name, and the text of an address from the Belfast Volunteers to the Catholics of Connaught, asserting that the cause was "a National cause" resting on "the natural rights of personal security, personal freedom, and private [property]" belonging to "every citizen, without distinction of birth, possessions, or talents."[26] Owen O'Conor's own election as delegate for County Roscommon to the Catholic Convention of 1792, alongside his uncle Charles O'Conor and his nephew M'Dermot of Coolavin for Sligo, situates the family squarely within the national leadership of the Catholic cause at the moment of its

[25]Society of United Irishmen, Declaration, Belfast, 1791; quoted in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XXV.

[26]Address from the Belfast Volunteers to the Catholics of Connaught, reproduced in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XXV.

most significant eighteenth-century mobilisation.

The narrative does not shy from the disappointments that followed — the dashing of hopes raised by the brief and conciliatory viceroyalty of Lord Fitzwilliam, recalled from Ireland in 1795 before fuller Catholic relief could be secured; the descent of constitutional agitation into the violence of the 1798 Rebellion, which, the book notes, "stopped, for a time, all constitutional agitation for religious liberty and political equality";[27] Owen O'Conor's own steady opposition to the Act of Union; and the fractured, uncertain character of Catholic political organisation in the Union's aftermath, as hopes that Union itself might bring emancipation were disappointed and the Catholic body reorganised, amid internal disagreement over tactics, into the Catholic Board and, eventually, the mass-based Catholic Association under Daniel O'Connell.

The book's narrative reaches its conclusion with the achievement that crowned this long campaign: Catholic Emancipation, secured in 1829, in which Owen O'Conor — by then O'Conor Don following the death of the previous holder of the title, his cousin of Clonalis — is presented as having played a recognised and honoured part. The text records his election as Member of Parliament for County Roscommon, the first Catholic O'Conor to sit in Parliament since the family's exclusion under the Penal Laws, and reproduces a letter of Daniel O'Connell to Owen O'Conor's son acknowledging his services to the Catholic cause.[28] Owen O'Conor died in 1831, and it is with his death — closing a public career

[27]The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XXVI.
[28]Daniel O'Connell to Owen O'Conor's son; letter reproduced in The O'Conors of Connaught, Chapter XXVII.

that had spanned the final, climactic phase of Catholic Ireland's long campaign for civil equality — that the substantive historical narrative of the book comes to rest.

VIII. The Documentary Apparatus

A word should be said about the structure that supports this narrative, since it is unusual for a family history of its period and forms a substantial part of the book's bulk and value. Eighteen lettered appendices, running from A to R, follow the twenty-eight narrative chapters, and they are not, for the most part, supplementary anecdote but primary legal and administrative record reproduced in full or in close translation. They include Felim O'Conor's own letter of submission; the 1603 indenture between Sir John Perrot and Hugh O'Conor Don; the subsequent dispute between Perrot and the Privy Council over the Composition's terms; the letters patent of James I; chancery inquisitions for County Roscommon under James I and Charles I, translated from their original Latin; the detailed examination of Hugh O'Conor taken before Sir Robert Meredith in 1642, at the outbreak of the Confederate war; the votes of the Lords and Commons on the propositions for reducing the kingdom of Ireland; the reports on the claims of transplanted persons in Connaught and Clare under the Cromwellian settlement; depositions taken in 1653 before the transplantation commissioners; a list of officers serving in the Duke of Gloucester's regiment; and, finally, the genealogical tables themselves.

This apparatus matters because it changes the character of the claims the main narrative makes. When the text asserts, for instance, that Colonel Hugh O'Conor's petition for restoration under the Act of Settlement was

left substantially unresolved at his death, the reader is not asked to accept this on the authority of family tradition alone; the relevant inquisitions and depositions are printed nearby, in the participants' own often difficult seventeenth-century legal language, so that the claim can be checked against the documents that generated it. For a work compiled partly from the unfinished manuscript of a professional antiquarian and completed by a family member with an obvious personal stake in its conclusions, this documentary transparency is a notable methodological choice, and it is one of the principal reasons the book has retained value as a historical source independent of the family narrative it was written to serve.

1X. Conclusion

Read as a continuous narrative, *The O'Conors of Connaught* traces an extraordinarily long arc: from a tenth-century king whose name became a surname, through two centuries of genuine sovereignty culminating in the high-kingship of Roderic O'Conor and its collision with Anglo-Norman conquest, through three centuries in which the family's kingship was hollowed out by internal rivalry and external pressure until it was formally surrendered for Crown tenure under Elizabeth I, through the catastrophic material losses of the Cromwellian and Williamite confiscations, and finally to a recovery of public standing achieved not through the recovery of lost lands but through scholarship, religious and political leadership, and sustained participation in the long constitutional campaign that culminated in Catholic Emancipation.

What gives the book its particular value as a historical source is less its narrative argument, which is straightforward and explicitly partisan

toward the family's own memory, than its documentary apparatus: the chancery inquisitions, depositions, letters patent, indentures, and correspondence reproduced at length throughout the text and in the appendices, which allow a reader to verify, qualify, or extend the authors' own account against the primary evidence on which it claims to rest. Compiled by one of the nineteenth century's most exacting Irish antiquarians and completed by a direct descendant of the family it describes, the work occupies an unusual position between scholarly history and family memorial — a position which, properly understood, makes it not less but more valuable as a record of how one Irish family's documented memory of itself was constructed, defended, and finally published, in the very years when the political struggle the book describes was reaching its conclusion.

Industry, Idleness, and the infrastructure of Isolation: A Critical Analysis of Charles O'Conor's 1773 Statistical Account of Kilronan Parish

I. Introduction

In the summer of 1773, Charles O'Conor of Ballinagare, County Roscommon, compiled a response to a series of queries circulated by the Dublin Society regarding the economic, agricultural, and social conditions of Ireland.[1] His focus was the parish of Kilronan, situated in the northernmost tip of County Roscommon, along the shores of Lough Allen and bordering the counties of Leitrim and Sligo. When republished twenty-five years later in Edinburgh by the agricultural reformer Sir John Sinclair, O'Conor's text was framed not merely as an antiquarian curiosity but as an explanatory blueprint for the social breakdowns that culminated in the devastating Irish Rebellion of 1798.[2]

O'Conor's *Statistical Account of the Parish of Kilronan* offers an invaluable window into a region standing at a precarious threshold between traditional Gaelic socio-economic structures and the encroaching forces of commercialised British modernisation. The document reveals a

[1]Charles O'Conor of Ballinagare (1710–1791) was a leading Irish Catholic antiquary, historian, and political pamphleteer. His grandson, Charles O'Conor of Belanagare (1764–1828), continued the family's scholarly tradition. The Statistical Account discussed here is attributed to the elder or middle generation of the family at Ballinagare. For the O'Conor family and their intellectual milieu, see Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, c. 1750–1800* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004), pp. 115–42.

[2]Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (1754–1835), Scottish agricultural improver and statistician, is best known for editing the *Statistical Account of Scotland* (21 vols, Edinburgh, 1791–99). His republication of O'Conor's Kilronan survey in 1798 extended his comparative improvement programme to Ireland. See Rosalind Mitchison, *Agricultural Sir John: The Life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, 1754–1835* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), pp. 189–94.

landscape blessed with vast, untapped natural wealth — rich mineral veins, navigable waters, and fertile alluvial valleys — yet paralysed by systemic poverty, infrastructural isolation, and deep-seated resistance to agrarian 'improvement'. This essay deconstructs O'Conor's account and examines its geographical, agricultural, industrial, and social revelations, contextualising the document within the broader landscape of late eighteenth-century Irish economic history and the political anxieties of the post-1798 Act of Union era.

II. The Editorial Framing: 1773 Reality and 1798 Retrospect

To fully understand the historical value of the Kilronan narrative, one must first separate the primary text written by O'Conor in 1773 from its editorial bookends added a quarter of a century later. The document passed from O'Conor to the Right Honourable William Burton Conyngham — a noted antiquary and public-spirited improver — before finding its way to the Edinburgh publisher.[3]

Writing in July 1798, in the immediate and bloody aftermath of the United Irishmen's uprising, Sinclair's editorial apparatus views O'Conor's twenty-five-year-old report with a sense of tragic

[3]William Burton Conyngham (1733–1796) was an Irish MP, antiquary, and one of the founders of the Royal Irish Academy. He was noted for his support of drainage schemes, road construction, and archaeological investigation in the west of Ireland. See R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760–1801* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 43.

vindication.[4] For the editor, the rebellion 'which has lately raged in that kingdom' was the natural, predictable outcome of a peasantry left to languish in what he characterised as a 'rotation of idleness and drinking'. The framing argues that had the Dublin Society's statistical investigations been pursued systematically across the entire island, the Irish government could have introduced the 'industry and knowledge' necessary to eradicate the seeds of social disorder. This framing represents a classic Enlightenment and British imperial viewpoint: social unrest is diagnosed not as a consequence of political disenfranchisement, religious discrimination, or colonial land confiscation, but as the product of a deficiency in 'wise laws' and 'useful public institutions'. By transforming a regional agricultural survey into a political post-mortem, the 1798 publication illustrates how upper-class commentators viewed the Irish landscape not only as a source of rent, but as a moral terrain requiring strict management to prevent geopolitical catastrophe. [5]

III. Topography, Geography, and the Boundaries of Isolation

O'Conor's responses to the first and second queries outline a distinct, insular geography defined by natural water barriers and dramatic topographical variation. Kilronan parish is bounded on the east by the Shannon and Lough Allen, on the north by a boundary stream dividing Leitrim and Roscommon, and on the south and west by the River

[4]Charles O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of the Parish of Kilronan, County of Roscommon', in Sir John Sinclair (ed.), *The Statistical Account of Scotland … to which is added a Statistical Account of the Parish of Kilronan, in the County of Roscommon, Ireland* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1798), p. i (editorial preface).

[5]The United Irishmen's rebellion of May–September 1798 resulted in approximately 10,000–30,000 deaths. For the rebellion's regional character and social causes, see Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 216–35; and Ruan O'Donnell, *The Rebellion in Wicklow 1798* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998).

Feorish (Boyle River). This network of waterways effectively created a peninsula of isolation in the northern uplands of Connaught.

The landscape itself is divided into two distinct geological zones. South of Bricklieve or Curlew Mountain range, the hills possess a limestone substratum topped with a 'kind earth', producing sweet herbage and reliable crops of oats — the classic pasture and tillage land of central Ireland. Eastward of Cross-Hill, towards the Shannon and Lough Allen, the soil transitions to a 'brittle, friable, brownish earth' approximately sixteen inches deep, resting upon a 'rotten slate' subsoil. O'Conor observes a unique hydrological consequence of this formation: the slate base allowed water to filtrate immediately, keeping the hillsides remarkably dry and producing a 'short and sapless grass' rather than the coarse, boggy growth typical of Irish mountain terrain.

IV. The Hydrological Landscape: Floods, Fisheries, and Neglected Navigation

Water dominates O'Conor's assessment of Kilronan's economic potential. He identifies Lough Allen as 'everywhere deep and navigable', spanning roughly nine miles in length. In 1773, the grand infrastructure project of the era was the extension of the Shannon Navigation system, connecting Lough Allen with the midlands and Dublin; yet O'Conor notes with evident frustration that the crucial canal works at Jamestown, situated merely seven miles distant, appeared 'this season suspended'.[6] This suspension illustrates the fitful, unreliable character of eighteenth-

[6]For the Shannon Navigation and its fitful progress through the eighteenth century, see Ruth Delany, *The Shannon Navigation* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2008), pp. 34–67. The Jamestown canal at the southern end of Lough Allen was part of this scheme.

century Irish public works, chronically afflicted by corruption, bureaucratic delays, and erratic parliamentary funding.

Beyond the Shannon, the parish was shaped by the Feorus and the Argnach (Arigna) rivers. Neither was navigable, and both were prone to sudden, violent mountain floods.[7] O'Conor provides a detailed, evidently fascinated account of the Argnach: rising in the deep glen dividing the Braliave and Slieve Anierin mountains, the river dropped rapidly through rocky gorges before meandering across a three-mile valley floor to meet the Shannon at Ballytra Bridge. Around 1743, local inhabitants had constructed small embankments to contain the river's flash floods; over time, these interventions forced the Argnach to widen and deepen its own channel, so that by 1773 it rarely overflowed more than once a year. The resulting alluvial valley floor — sitting twelve to fourteen feet above the low-water mark — constituted an exceptionally productive microclimate, with reflected sunlight from the flanking mountain walls causing oats to ripen three weeks earlier than in any neighbouring district.

Despite this environmental bounty, the aquatic resources of the parish remained entirely uncommodified. O'Conor observes that Lough Allen and its tributary rivers were 'immensely stored with pike, eel, trout, and perch' in all seasons except mid-winter, yet this vast protein source was never employed as a basis of commercial industry nor despatched to any market for sale. In a region where subsistence was chronically precarious,

[7]O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of Kilronan', pp. 4-5. The Arigna River (O'Conor's 'Argnach') rises in the upland glen between Slieve Anierin and Braliave and descends steeply to the Shannon at Battlebridge. For the river's geomorphology, see G. L. Herries Davies and R. C. Mollan (eds.), *Richard Griffith, 1784–1878* (Dublin: Royal Dublin Society, 1980), pp. 112–13.

the failure to develop a commercial fishery reflects a broader cultural partition: to the local population, the rivers were a resource for immediate, communal consumption, not a capitalistic asset to be exploited for external markets.

V. Agricultural Stagnation and the Tenant's Dilemma

The agricultural profile of Kilronan in 1773 was dangerously monocultural, revolving almost exclusively around oats and potatoes. O'Conor states that no other root or corn had 'ever been attempted'. While the alluvial flats produced excellent yields, the wider parish suffered from a near-total absence of modern agricultural technique or soil management.

The Dynamics of Soil Reclamation

The core of the agricultural problem lay in attitudes — or, more precisely, in the structural incentives — governing soil management. While the south-western parts of the parish near Ballyfarnon had historically used limestone gravel to sweeten the soil, the eastern and northern regions relied solely on animal dung. When O'Conor interrogated the local farmers as to why they did not utilise the limestone gravel abundant in their own hills, they gave him three distinct responses: first, they claimed their soil 'never produced marl, limestone, or limestone gravel'; second, they stated they had 'never been used to improve'; and third, they asserted that any visible improvement would

result in their being 'turned out of their farms, when meliorated'.[8] O'Conor took it upon himself to disprove the first two contentions by conducting soil tests across the local hills, successfully burning local stone into functional manuring lime. However, his discoveries were met with displeasure rather than gratitude, because the third reason 'overbalanced every other'. This exchange exposes the structural pathology at the heart of the Irish land tenure system.[9] Under the prevailing arrangements in Connaught, tenants-at-will or short-term leaseholders possessed a powerful rational incentive to avoid any visible farm improvement. An increase in the carrying capacity or productivity of the soil would immediately signal to the landlord or his middleman that the holding could bear a higher rent; if the tenant could not meet the inflated figure upon lease expiry, eviction would follow and the improved farm would be re-let at the higher rate.

What O'Conor and subsequent British commentators diagnosed as cultural 'idleness' or 'ignorance' was thus, in considerable measure, a highly rational strategy of self-preservation adopted by a vulnerable peasantry. O'Conor notes that the local landlord Thomas Tennison, Esq. constructed three fine lime kilns for his tenants' use and demonstrated admirable results on his personal demesne; yet his tenants 'profited little

[8]O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of Kilronan', pp. 7-8. Tenant-at-will status, prevalent in Connaught, meant that occupiers could be removed at the landlord's pleasure without compensation for improvements. The absence of Ulster Custom west of the Shannon is discussed in W. E. Vaughan, *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 13–16.

[9]The economic rationality of tenant resistance to visible improvement under insecure Irish leases is central to the argument of Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800–1850* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 98–107; and James S. Donnelly Jr., *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork: The Rural Economy and the Land Question* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 3–20.

by his example', entirely because the underlying economic insecurity of their tenure remained unaddressed.

The Monoculture of Survival

The reliance on oats and potatoes created a fragile economic ecosystem. Potatoes, rated at five to six pence per hundredweight, served as the primary subsistence food. Oats were almost entirely diverted to illicit distillation, functioning as the principal source of liquid currency via spirit sales. Horned cattle — described by O'Conor as a 'bad breed' — were reared on the mountains primarily to pay rents, while pigs provided the secondary mechanism for cash generation. Notably, the parish reared no sheep, despite O'Conor's insistence that the dry mountain slopes, if properly limed, would provide excellent pasture. The total absence of sheep underscores the lack of any localised wool-processing economy, leaving the population entirely dependent upon external textiles.

VI. Industrial Failure and Potential: Iron, Coal, and the Ghost of the Forests

Kilronan and the wider Lough Allen basin sit atop the Arigna geological formation, one of the richest mineral deposits in Ireland. O'Conor's report captures this district at a fascinating industrial crossroads: the old charcoal-based iron industry had entirely collapsed, while the modern, coal-fired industrial revolution had not yet taken root.

O'Conor notes that Ballyfarnon formerly possessed an iron foundry and mills, which by 1773 stood completely disused for want of charcoal. A similar fate had befallen the Drumshanbo foundry on the eastern shore of the lake, where the local woods had been entirely consumed to feed

the furnaces.[10] This environmental devastation was characteristic of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century colonial industrialisation in Ireland: English entrepreneurs had systematically felled Ireland's native woodlands to smelt iron ore, extracting rapid profits without any provision for sustainable forestry or replanting.

Despite the collapse of the timber supply, O'Conor recognised that Kilronan sat upon a substantial industrial resource. A 'vein of very fine coal' showed itself throughout the entire district; however, the only active mine was operated by a Mr Jones, and its management was primitive in the extreme. O'Conor observed that if any water, however slight, came upon the workmen, they were 'obliged to desist, not having even a common pump to rid themselves of any part'.[11] The absence of basic drainage technology — at a time when atmospheric steam engines had been common in British coalfields for over half a century — confined extraction to surface outcroppings and shallow, dry pits.

The transportation of coal further illustrated the region's technological backwardness. Approximately two hundred and fifty horses were employed carrying coal and culm from Jones's colliery in small basket loads, each horse bearing just half a barrel at a cost of twelve shillings per

[10]For the collapse of the charcoal iron industry in Ireland and the systematic deforestation it entailed, see Eileen McCracken, *The Irish Woods Since Tudor Times* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), pp. 56–82; and Andy Bielenberg, *Ireland and the Industrial Revolution: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Irish Industry, 1801–1922* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 17–21.

[11]O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of Kilronan', p. 10. The absence of basic drainage technology at the Arigna collieries contrasts sharply with contemporary practice in the British coalfields, where Newcomen atmospheric engines had been in use since c. 1712. See John Kanefsky and John Robey, 'Steam Engines in 18th-Century Britain: A Quantitative Assessment', *Technology and Culture*, 21:2 (1980), pp. 161–86.

ton for every ten miles. O'Conor lamented that the local carriers 'cannot be persuaded to the use of wheel cars': a single horse-drawn wheel car could easily carry two barrels, meaning one animal could perform the work of four. The rejection of the wheel car likely reflected the steep, unpaved mountain tracks where basket loads were more stable than primitive axles, as much as any cultural conservatism per se.

The Vision of an Irish Staffordshire

O'Conor's sixteenth response rises to a pitch of prophetic industrial boosterism. He argues that the Lough Allen district possessed all the raw ingredients to rival — or surpass — Staffordshire as a centre of ceramic and industrial manufacturing: inexhaustible quarries of flint within five miles of Ballytra Bridge; vast deposits of fine potter's earth; abundant iron ore; cheap coal at eight shillings per ton at the pit-head; land at nine shillings per acre; and labour at eight pence per day.[12]

O'Conor contrasted these figures with conditions in Burslem, the heart of the English Potteries where Josiah Wedgwood manufactured his famous creamware: manufacturers there were obliged to transport flint sixty miles overland and sat sixty miles from the nearest seaport. Kilronan, by contrast, was on the verge of accessing direct water carriage to almost every major Irish port via the Shannon and Grand Canal networks. O'Conor even calculated that a seven-mile canal cut across a gentle eight-foot elevation drop could link Lough Allen northward to

[12]For Wedgwood's Burslem manufactory and the Potteries' dependence on overland flint transport from the southeast, see Neil McKendrick, 'Josiah Wedgwood and the Commercialization of the Potteries', in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982), pp. 100–45.

Lough Gill, opening direct navigation to the Atlantic port of Sligo.[13] Had these investments been realised, the Arigna region might have become the industrial centre of the Irish west. Instead, it remained undercapitalised, strangled by infrastructure delays and an absence of speculative venture capital.

VII. Social Realities: Idleness, Distillation, and the Shadow of Emigration

The human landscape depicted by O'Conor is one of profound underemployment and social stagnation. Kilronan parish contained 370 families; calculating a conservative average of four individuals per household, O'Conor estimated a total population of approximately 1,480. His assessment of this workforce was stark: they 'only barely procure themselves a subsistence, and are utterly useless to the public'. The entire surrounding district was described as 'equally well inhabited, and equally idle', with the sole exception of the vicinity of Drumkeeran, where minor improvements were under way under the guidance of local improvers such as Henry Seely, Esq. and the Reverend Mr Crawford.

The Gendered Division of Labour

O'Conor reserves his sharpest criticisms for the women of Kilronan, whom he describes as 'entirely idle' and without 'any manner of employment'. In a typical late eighteenth-century modernisation scheme, the standard mechanism for integrating rural women into the cash

[13]O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of Kilronan', p. 11. The proposed seven-mile canal from Lough Allen to Lough Gill would have required a cutting through the Curlew Hills watershed. For the wider Grand Canal and Shannon system, see Delany, *Shannon Navigation*, pp. 80–96.

economy was the cottage linen industry; yet the women of Kilronan refused to cultivate flax, offering a traditionalist defence: none of their ancestors had attempted it and, consequently, their lands were 'unfit for it'. As with the limestone gravel, O'Conor undertook an experiment to break this conceptual barrier, sowing flax seed on the fertile banks of the Argnach and on a dry, limed hillside with considerable success.[14]

The women's resistance to flax cultivation, however, was rooted in a realistic assessment of domestic economics rather than mere stubbornness. Introducing linen production required heavy upfront investment in spinning wheels, hackles, and seed, alongside a substantial daily expenditure of labour in steeping, scutching, spinning, and weaving. For women already burdened with childcare, potato cultivation, fuel gathering, and turf cutting within a subsistence framework, the adoption of an entirely new industrial process for a distant and fluctuating market offered little immediate appeal.

The Illicit Distillation Economy

Instead of spinning linen, the population channelled its energy into an alternative, far more immediately lucrative domestic industry: the production of illicit whiskey (*poitín*). O'Conor counted twelve active copper stills within the parish and immediate district, and noted that the

[14]For domestic textile production and its gendered labour demands in late eighteenth-century Ireland, see Brenda Collins, 'Proto-Industrialization and Pre-Famine Emigration', *Social History*, 7:2 (1982), pp. 127–46; and Marilyn Cohen, *Linen, Family and Community in Tullylish, County Down, 1690–1914* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), pp. 32–56.

women were ‘very great promoters of this traffic’.[15] His description of the local spirit trade is vivid: as every cottager distilled his oats into spirits, every cabin became alternately a whiskey house until the produce was consumed, neighbours making it their custom to assist in the disposal of one another’s produce in a self-perpetuating ‘rotation of idleness and drinking’.

This cycle was not merely a cultural pastime; it constituted the foundational pillar of the local underground economy.[16] In an isolated region lacking reliable roads or wheel cars, transporting bulky sacks of raw oats down the mountains to distant market towns was economically unviable. By distilling the oats into high-value, low-volume spirits, the tenant transformed a cumbersome crop into a durable, easily portable form of liquid currency. The communal consumption described by O’Conor simultaneously functioned as an informal social network, binding the community together and reinforcing the mutual aid arrangements essential for heavy seasonal labour such as turf cutting and harvesting. The market town of Ballyfarnon reflected this monoculture starkly: reduced to ten cabins, its inhabitants subsisted entirely by dram selling, while the weekly market had been entirely abandoned for want of legitimate trade.

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[15]O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of Kilronan', p. 8. For illicit distillation as a structural feature of the Connaught rural economy and its relationship to oat cultivation and transport costs, see E. B. McGuire, *Irish Whiskey: A History of Distilling in Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), pp. 133–58.

[16]The communal consumption cycle described by O'Conor reflects what E. P. Thompson termed a 'moral economy': a set of norms governing the distribution of scarce resources within a community, resistant to market penetration. See E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76–136.

The Shadow of America

Finally, O'Conor's account captures the earliest tremors of a demographic tide that would later reshape Ireland. He notes that only two families had emigrated from the parish to America during the previous season, and 'never any before'; yet he observed a palpable, restless curiosity among the population regarding their success, surmising that 'the spirit of emigration might quickly seize them'.[17] Writing in 1773, on the absolute eve of the American Revolutionary War, O'Conor astutely detected that the psychological barrier to emigration had been broken. The local peasantry, trapped between insecure land tenures and an extractive economic system, were already scanning the Atlantic horizon for an escape from the systemic stagnation of Connaught.

VIII. Conclusion

Charles O'Conor's *Statistical Account of Kilronan* is far more than a dry collection of answers to bureaucratic queries; it is a rich social text exposing the internal contradictions of late eighteenth-century Ireland. On one hand, O'Conor presents a vision of a modernising, industrial future — a region of canals, coal mines, thriving iron foundries, and advanced ceramic manufactories that might have rivalled the powerhouse of Staffordshire. On the other, he documents a landscape defined by tenurial terror, where tenants actively resisted soil improvement out of entirely rational fear of eviction, and where the

[17]O'Conor, 'Statistical Account of Kilronan', p. 10. On the eve of the American Revolutionary War, Ulster Presbyterian emigration to North America was at its highest level since the 1720s. For the demographic and economic drivers, see R. J. Dickson, *Ulster Emigration to Colonial America, 1718–1775* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 199–221.

primary economic engine was the illicit distillation of oats in smoky hillside cabins.

When the document was republished in the shadow of the 1798 Rebellion, its lessons were apparent to contemporaries: the failure of the Irish state and its landed elites to bridge this gap — to provide secure tenure, build stable infrastructure, and channel local energies into legitimate commercial industries — had left the population isolated, impoverished, and profoundly alienated from the political order. By examining Kilronan through O'Conor's sharp and observant eye, we gain a textured understanding of the localised fractures that ultimately contributed to the wider convulsions of modern Irish history.

PART TWO

Iron, Coal, and Industrial Ambition

Coal, Iron, and Capital: The Arigna Mines and Iron Works in Isaac Weld's Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon (1832)

I. Introduction

Isaac Weld's Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon[1], published by the Royal Dublin Society in 1832, stands among the most ambitious topographical and economic surveys produced in early nineteenth-century Ireland. Unlike the briefer parish accounts that preceded it, Weld's survey drew upon personal observation, engineering reports, parliamentary testimony, and the latest geological science to produce a comprehensive portrait of a county whose mineral wealth had long attracted projectors and speculators. The section devoted to collieries and iron works—covering some forty pages from page thirty-three to page seventy-three—constitutes one of the fullest contemporary accounts of the Arigna mining district anywhere in print. It encompasses the early history of iron manufacture on the shores of Lough Allen, the troubled careers of the O'Reilly and La Touche enterprises, the surveys of Richard Griffith, the formation of rival joint-stock companies in the 1820s, and a remarkable list of employees and their salaries at the time of the mining surveyor Mr. Twigg's first visit. This essay draws directly on Weld's text to examine what the Survey reveals about the Arigna mines: their geology, their workforce, their economics, and the larger story of industrial ambition frustrated by geological, logistical, and managerial obstacles in a remote corner of Roscommon.

[1]Isaac Weld, Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon (Dublin: Royal Dublin Society, 1832).

II. Isaac Weld and the Statistical Survey

Isaac Weld (1774–1856) was a Dublin-born traveller and topographer whose earlier publications—notably his account of travels in North America—had established him as an accomplished observer of landscape and society. His Roscommon survey was commissioned by the Royal Dublin Society as part of a wider programme of county statistical surveys intended to document the agricultural, mineral, and manufacturing resources of Ireland and suggest improvements. Weld brought to the work a combination of firsthand observation—he visited the Arigna district on multiple occasions, in 1825 and again in 1830—and a scholarly apparatus of printed reports, parliamentary papers, and personal correspondence with engineers and company directors. The result is a text that is simultaneously descriptive, analytical, and at moments strikingly personal: Weld records conversations, anecdotes, and his own measurements of coal seams as an eyewitness to the changing fortunes of the district. The mineral section of the Survey opens by noting that the only mines worked in Roscommon of any consequence were those of coal and iron on the confines of Lough Allen, and that 'as their history is one of peculiar interest, a section apart may be devoted to it.' Weld's characterisation of this history as one of 'peculiar interest' proves to be an understatement: what follows is an account of successive enterprises characterised by technical ambition, financial improvidence, and the structural limitations of peripheral industrial development in pre-Famine Ireland.

III. The Connaught Coalfield: Geology and Extent

Weld begins his mineral survey with an account of the geological formation of the Connaught coalfield. The beds of coal, he explains, are

situated at a considerable elevation in the mountains forming the western and northern shores of Lough Allen, their outer edges or outcrops plainly distinguishable in several places on the mountainside. The coal thus lay exposed to view, and its existence in the country 'could scarcely fail of being early known.'[2] Early exploitation had been rudimentary: peasants on the western shore had employed a simple but ingenious system of removing the covering rock above exposed seams by damming a stream, creating a concentrated head of water, and then releasing it suddenly to sweep away the overlying strata and expose the coal beneath. This practice, Weld notes, was 'the sole and actual invention of the peasants of the neighbourhood, who united together for the labour, and shared in the profits'—a notable detail of vernacular technical ingenuity.

Weld relies extensively on the survey published in 1818 by Richard Griffith, the foremost geological authority on the Irish coalfields. Griffith had computed that the whole of the coal country in the vicinity of Lough Allen, lying within the edge of the limestone, contained about 114,000 Irish acres, divisible into four parts. The two divisions lying on the western side of the lake were the most important for County Roscommon. Griffith estimated a total coal field on the southern and western divisions of 5,000 Irish acres, and—calculating produce at 7,840 tons per acre—projected a probable yield of thirty million tons from the southern and western divisions. He proposed that even assuming annual domestic consumption of 50,000 tons and a further 10,000 tons for the iron works, the supply would suffice for 500 years. Griffith's opinion of

[2]Isaac Weld, Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon (Dublin: Royal Dublin Society, 1832), p.33.

the quality of Arigna coal was equally encouraging: he identified bed No. 12, the 'three foot coal,' as fortunately of great extent, excellent as domestic fuel, and 'amongst the best in the empire' for smelting iron.[3]

Weld himself entered the Aughabehy colliery in 1825, accompanied by one of the English miners employed by the Arigna company, measuring the coal face in various parts and finding that in no instance did it reach two feet in thickness, the far greater part being considerably less. He records this discrepancy with characteristic precision, noting that the faults or slips crossing the mountain, already identified by Griffith, could occasion differences of twenty, forty, or even one hundred yards in the level of the same bed, and that knowledge of these disruptions was 'of the utmost importance to the coal miner, otherwise they must lead to great expense, and possibly to the abandonment of the colliery.' Twigg, the Chesterfield mining surveyor engaged by the company in 1827, subsequently calculated that the 160 English acres of the Aughabehy mining ground might contain 408,000 tons of coking coal—but qualified this figure as hypothetical, conditional on the bed maintaining the thickness he had been able to measure.[4]

IV. The O'Reilly Iron Works, 1788–1793

Weld identifies the establishment of iron works at Arigna by three brothers of the name of O'Reilly, around the year 1788, as 'the first great

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[3]Ibid., p. 41. Griffith, Report on the Connaught Coal District (1818), p. 29. Griffith calculated approximately thirty million tons of coal as the probable yield of the southern and western divisions, sufficient (assuming 50,000 tons annual domestic consumption plus 10,000 tons for the iron works) "for the supposed demand for 500 years to come."
[4]Ibid., p. 57. Twigg calculated 160 English acres of coal ground at Aughabehy, yielding at the proved thickness 2,550 tons per acre, giving a total of 408,000 tons.

era in the mining history of this district.' Iron manufacture was not entirely new to the locality: it had long been conducted on the opposite shore of Lough Allen, at the base of Slieve-a-neeran—literally the Iron Mountain in Irish—using charcoal from the surrounding forests. But with the destruction of those forests the charcoal-based industry had died, and the use of pit coal for smelting iron was, Weld notes, 'comparatively of recent introduction in England, and was totally unknown or unpractised in Ireland, until the O'Reillys had the spirit and boldness to venture on the attempt.'[5]

The iron produced at Arigna under the O'Reillys obtained a high reputation. Both in castings and in bars, the product 'obtained the highest reputation in Dublin, and in every place to which it was sent.' Weld personally observed specimens of their castings in several houses during his first visit to the country—including a water trough in a smith's forge that appeared extremely well made, and which, though light and thin, had stood hard and constant use.[6] Their commercial decision to move into bar iron production as well as pig iron and castings required considerably more capital and was attended by greater difficulty, and it was later supposed that this expansion had overextended their resources. Seeking financial relief, the O'Reillys approached the Dublin banking house of Messrs. La Touche, who made what appeared a reasonable advance. When repayment became impossible, fresh accommodation was extended, then further alarms followed, until the O'Reillys mortgaged their works and premises, which were finally brought to sale under the

[5]Ibid., p. 37.
[6]Ibid. The iron produced by the O'Reillys in both castings and bars "obtained the highest reputation in Dublin, and in every place to which it was sent."

Court of Chancery. The price paid at that sale was £25,000.[7]

V. La Touche and the Failure of the Works, 1793–1808

One of the partners of the La Touche bank—Weld does not name him but the reference is clearly to Peter La Touche—purchased the works at chancery and determined to have them carried on for his own account. Weld provides one of the most vivid passages in the entire Survey[8] when recounting a personal encounter: riding with this 'excellent and kind-hearted man, at a venerable period of his life,' and stopping before a large iron gate in his beautiful park of Bellevue, Wicklow, La Touche asked Weld whether he had ever before seen so costly a piece of workmanship. 'That gate, Sir, cost me £80,000; for it is the only thing I ever got out of the Arigna iron works, in return for all my money expended there.'

The attribution of blame for the failure occupied later commentators. Weld, drawing on Griffith's 1818 report, emphasises managerial instability as the primary cause: the plans of each new agent or manager 'were generally at variance with those of his predecessor; and the destruction of the old, and the erection of new works caused great additional expense. Some were undertaken which sound judgment would have disapproved; and others, most useful, injudiciously destroyed.' A dam constructed across the Arigna river above the works was of the 'former nature'—its collapse was a catastrophe predictable from the constant pressure of an immense body of water, aided in time of flood by

[7]Appendix xxv and p. 37. Weld records that their castings included a water trough in a smith's forge that "appeared to be extremely well made, and which, although light and thin, had stood out hard and constant use."
[8]Ibid., p. 38.

a furious mountain torrent. La Touche eventually abandoned the works as a hopeless and profitless concern around 1808, some twenty years after the O'Reillys had commenced them, keeping only a caretaker on the premises to prevent pillage.[9]

VI. The Collieries: Aughabehy and Rover

The iron works had been served by two principal collieries, both leased to the undertakers. The nearest, called the Rover colliery, lay about half a mile from the works; the other, the Aughabehy colliery—the largest and most extensive in the district—lay three miles distant, connected to the works by a winding mountain road prone to interruption by rains and floods, along which coal was conveyed on horseback. The Rover colliery belonged to the Archbishop of Tuam; Aughabehy to Colonel Tenison, whose royalties extended entirely across the mountain to its southern face, towards the low country, and whose principal seat, Castle Tenison, lay beyond the ridge.[10] When the iron works ceased, the collieries attached to them were either closed or flooded, but Colonel Tenison kept pits open on his own account on the outer or southern face of the mountain, selling coal to purchasers from as far as County Cavan.

Weld provides a detailed description of the working method employed in these thin-seam collieries. The Irish colliers worked in a recumbent position with wads of heath or grass to ease the hips and shoulders. The practice was to cut the whole of the coal away and to fill the vacuity at

[9]Ibid., p. 39. Weld paraphrases Richard Griffith (Report on the Connaught Coal District, 1818), attributing the failure chiefly to managerial instability: "the plans of each new master (that is of each new agent or manager of the works) were generally at variance with those of his predecessor."
[10]Ibid., p. 40.

intervals with props, called pillars, to support the roof; the stones for this purpose were let down from above. At Aughabehy in 1825, Weld found horses used to raise the coal to the surface. At the nearby Tullynaha colliery, worked by the Irish Mining Company from 1825, a steam engine had been set to work for the same purpose—but when Weld revisited in 1830, it had gone out of order and been left in that state for more than a twelve-month, and the coal was being brought up merely by a common windlass and buckets, worked by men.[11] The contrast between the capital and technology notionally deployed and the actual condition of the works on the ground is one of the most striking themes of Weld's account

VII. Joint-Stock Companies and the New Arigna Company, 1824–1832

The renewed excitement over the Arigna coal and iron resources in the early 1820s arose directly from the dissemination of Griffith's optimistic geological assessments. In May 1824, Griffith repeated his conclusions before a committee of the House of Commons, and the parliamentary testimony of John Leslie Foster M.P. characterised Griffith's reports as 'more practical invitations for investment of British capital in Ireland, than any other I know to exist.' Within a year, three joint-stock companies had entered the field: the Arigna Coal and Iron Company, the Irish Mining Company, and the Hibernian Mining Company.[12] The Arigna company obtained possession of the old works and the collieries

[11]Ibid., p. 46. Weld describes the Irish colliers' technique: "it is the practice to cut the whole of the coal away, and to fill up the vacuity, at intervals, with props, called pillars, to support the roof... the stones for the purpose are let down from above."
[12]Ibid., p. 43. Weld records testimony delivered 5 April 1824 before a House of Commons select committee by John Leslie Foster M.P. (later Baron of the Exchequer), endorsing Griffith's reports as "more practical invitations for investment of British capital in Ireland, than any other I know to exist."

attached to them; the other two companies commenced operations in the mountains north of the Arigna river, in the district Griffith had designated the western division.

Weld visited the Arigna works for the first time in the spring of 1825, shortly after the new company had taken possession during the winter of 1824–5. What he found was a scene of busy, if premature, optimism. The buildings and offices, confined within an extensive yard, were undergoing repairs.[13] Captain Vivian presided as mining agent, with engineers, smiths, a fire master, masons, and miners—all Englishmen skilled in their respective departments—actively employed. Weld describes the settlement as 'like a little colony in a new country,' pleasurably contrasting in its good housewifery with 'the ordinary habits of the people of the surrounding wild districts.' However, ardent spirits; 'the liquid devil, in the emphatic language of the late Dean Kirwan', had already begun to exercise a baneful influence, and 'those who should have set a better example, were amongst the first to succumb.'

VIII. The Workforce: 'A List of the Agents, &c., Employed at Arigna'

One of the most valuable primary documents embedded in Weld's account is a complete list of agents, clerks, supervisors, and other salaried employees at the Arigna works at the time of Mr. Twigg's first visit in 1827. It offers a window onto the hierarchical structure and the ethnic composition of the skilled workforce assembled by the joint-stock

[13]Ibid., p. 47. Weld visited Arigna during the winter of 1824–5. The company took possession of the premises "in the course of the winter 1824–5."

company. The list is reproduced in full below as Weld presents it.[14]

Table 1
A List of the Agents, &c., Employed at Arigna at the Time of Mr. Twigg's First Visit
(Weld, Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon, p. 53)

Names	Employment	Where Employed	£	s.	d.
Mr. John Vivian	Chief Manager	Iron works	500	0	0
Mr. O'Beirne	Principal Clerk	Do.	92	6	2
Mr. Morton	Second do.	Do.	46	3	1
George M'Dermott	Storekeeper	Do.	60	0	0
William Moran	Furnace yard keeper	Do.	48	0	0
Michael Deely	Watchman by day	Do.	18	15	0
Francis Gilhooly	Do. by night	Do.	18	15	0
Michael Deely, jun.	Watchman by day	Do.	18	15	0
James Sweany	Do. by night	Do.	18	15	0
Hugh M'Namara	Stablekeeper & house servant to Mr. Vivian	Do.	28	0	0
James Dick	Colliery agent	Collieries	100	0	0
Patrick Guyhen	Do. clerk	Do.	48	0	0
Robert	Do. do.	Do.	24	0	0

[14]Ibid., p. 53 (table).

Names	Employment	Where Employed	£	s.	d.
Johnstone					
John Brenan	Dep. colliery agent	Do.	48	0	0
Michael Kervolsh	Do.	Do.	50	0	0
Con. O'Donnell	Agent	Ironstone mines	25	0	0
Michael M'Manus	Do.	Do.	20	0	0
Edward Mount	Watchman	At the colliery	18	0	0
Michael Deely	Do.	Do.	18	0	0
Conor Judge	Watchman & salesman	Rover colliery	18	0	0
James M'Lochlan	Clerk furnace yard	Iron works	18	0	0
John Brady	Road Overseer	On mountain roads	30	0	0
Francis Northall	Furnace manager	Iron works	273	0	0
Mr. Walsh	Employed to transmit money from Dublin to Arigna for workmen's wages	—	200	0	0
Total			**1739**	**9**	**3**

The list deserves close reading. The total annual salary bill for twenty-four named posts amounted to £1,739 9s. 3d.—a substantial overhead

for a concern that had not yet produced a single ton of iron. John Vivian, the chief manager, commanded £500 per annum, a salary far exceeding any other in the establishment and comparable to those of senior professional men in Dublin. Francis Northall, the furnace manager, earned £273: a skilled and responsible post, though well below Vivian's. The clerical staff—O'Beirne as Principal Clerk at £92 and Morton as Second Clerk at £46—were paid at rates typical of commercial Ireland of the period. A remarkably distinctive entry is that of Mr. Walsh, who was employed not in any operational capacity but 'to transmit money from Dublin to Arigna for workmen's wages,' at an annual salary of £200: a role that speaks eloquently of the distance of the enterprise from any banking or financial infrastructure.

The ethnic and geographical composition of the senior establishment is equally telling. Captain Vivian and the English technical staff—described by Weld as engineers, smiths, fire master, masons, and miners 'all Englishmen, skilled in the business of their respective departments'—formed a professional cadre imported wholesale from the British coalfields. Scottish mining agents brought over to conduct the works found it 'a subject of no small surprise' that a large capital was devoted to collieries which, measured against those they knew at home, 'would scarcely be thought worth the working' in Britain. The Irish colliers, however, astonished them in return by their dexterity in extracting coal from seams so thin they had to work in a recumbent position. By contrast, several of the named salaried employees—Patrick Guyhen, John Brenan, Michael Kervolsh, Con. O'Donnell, Michael M'Manus, Conor Judge, Hugh M'Namara—bear Irish names and may represent locally-recruited supervisory staff who bridged the English technical

management and the Irish colliery workforce.

IX. Iron Production, Costs, and the Limits of the Enterprise

The commercial results of the new company's iron works were deeply discouraging. Weld records that the total quantity of iron produced between November 1825 and May 1826 amounted to only 230 tons, 8 cwt., 3 qrs. of pig iron, at a mere cost of making of £8 4s. per ton. The blame fell partly on the furnace: originally 44 feet in height and 12 feet in the bosh, it had been taken up for repair when Weld visited in spring 1825, and when he returned in autumn 1830, the hearth had again been removed and was still awaiting repair. In the interval, the furnace had 'gobbled'—a term of art describing a charge that consolidates into a mass without being sufficiently fused—an accident attributed by Henry Clarke in his evidence before the House of Commons select committee to the sinister influence of some adverse party in London, acting through the workmen.[15]

The coal supply proved equally problematic. Examination of the workmen's wages books for the Aughabehy shaft revealed that of 795 tons raised by the Arigna company, only one-quarter consisted of good coal fit for coking, which had stood the company in 15s. 4d. per ton on the spot, whilst the remaining three-quarters consisted of culm worth, after deducting royalty dues, only 3s. per ton. It was with this coal, at 15s. 4d. per ton, reduced to coke and valued by Twigg at 30s. per ton, that the small quantity of iron previously produced at Arigna had been made. 'Of course,' Weld observes with dry precision, 'the iron could not fail of

[15]Ibid., p. 49.

being dear, estimating its price merely from the cost of the materials used in the making.' The combined result was damning: in the course of seven years, with an outlay probably exceeding £50,000 by the new company, the total produce of iron at Arigna 'did not amount to 300 tons.'[16]

A succession of expert opinions had been canvassed on the cost at which pig iron ought to be produced at Arigna. Mr. John Grieve of Edinburgh, examining the works in 1800, had estimated £2 17s. 3d. per ton. Mr. Thomas Guest of the Dowlais Iron Works in South Wales had estimated £4 15s. per ton. Griffith himself, writing during the period of abandonment, had estimated £3 5s. 6½d., reducible with recommended improvements to £3 2s. 5d. per ton. Against these estimates, the actual cost under the new company's management appeared ruinous—and the estimates themselves were largely hypothetical, based on calculations of what costs should be rather than on records of what they had been.[17]

The coal transported from the Lough Allen basin by canal also remained modest in volume. Weld records, from figures supplied by the Directors of the Royal Canal, that between 1829 and 1831 only thirty-three boats carrying a total of 1,132 tons 1 cwt. of coal had entered the canal from Lough Allen—a quantity wholly inadequate to the grand projections of national energy independence that had animated the earlier promoters of the coalfield.[18]

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[16]Ibid., p. 52.
[17]Ibid., pp. 71–73.
[18]Ibid., p. 34. The Directors of the Royal Canal supplied Weld with figures showing that during 1829–1831 a total of 33 boats carried 1,132 tons 1 cwt. of coal from Lough Allen down the canal.

X. Conclusion

Weld's Statistical Survey offers the historian of the Arigna mines something that no other single source provides: a sustained, empirically grounded, firsthand account of the mines and works over a period of active if troubled activity, written by a trained and sceptical observer who visited the district on multiple occasions and who had access to private company reports, parliamentary testimony, and geological surveys not generally available in print. His account moves seamlessly between the geological—the thickness of coal seams, the disposition of faults, the chemical composition of the coal according to Mr. Kirwan's analysis—and the human: the anecdote of La Touche's iron gate, the scene of English miners making themselves comfortable like a 'little colony in a new country,' the Irish colliers lying on their backs in narrow seams, the insoluble problem of the mountain road to Aughabehy colliery.

The employee list on page 53 of the Survey crystallises the central tension of the entire Arigna enterprise: a heavily capitalised, English-managed undertaking, imposing London-scale overhead on a remote Irish coalfield whose geological resources were genuinely present but whose exploitation demanded technical precision, local knowledge, and institutional patience that no succession of optimistic projectors had yet found the means to supply together. Weld's Survey remained, for decades after its publication, the most authoritative account of the Arigna mines—and its note, in the footnote added after the main text was written, that as of February 1832 smelting had still not recommenced, that the rail-way had been completed and found effective, and that 'the coke had proved excellent,' reads as a fitting epitaph for a district whose mineral wealth was never in doubt, but whose industrial future remained

perpetually, elusively, just within reach.

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Iron, Coal, and the Limits of Improvement: Thomas Guest's 1804 Report on the Arigna Iron-Works, and the Wider History of an Industrial Experiment in County Roscommon

I. Introduction

In October 1804, Thomas Guest, the director of the Dowlais Iron Company in Merthyr Tydfil, travelled from south Wales to a remote valley on the western shore of Lough Allen in County Roscommon. He had been engaged by Peter La Touche, the Dublin banker who had taken possession of the Arigna iron-works some eleven years earlier, to survey the works and to advise on whether the enterprise could yet be made profitable. The result was a short technical document, the *Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland*, published in Dublin in 1810 but dated from Guest's visit of October 1804 and his subsequent letter of March 1805.[1] It is, on its face, an unremarkable artefact of industrial archaeology: a survey of furnaces, water-wheels and mine-workings, followed by columns of pounds, shillings and pence. Yet read against the broader history of the Arigna enterprise, Guest's report becomes a revealing document for the historian of Irish economic development — not because its recommendations were acted upon, but precisely because they were not.

This essay argues that the Guest report should be understood less as a blueprint for industrial success than as a diagnostic record of the structural obstacles confronting large-scale manufacturing in the Irish midlands and west during the late Georgian period. Guest, an

[1]Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810).

experienced ironmaster from one of the most successful works in Wales, brought a professional and broadly optimistic eye to Arigna; his estimates suggested that, with substantial new investment, the works could be rendered profitable. But the very faults he catalogued — undercapitalised infrastructure, an unreliable and remote workforce of mine labourers, a forge "ill adapted" to current methods of bar-iron production, decayed machinery, and, above all, the absence of cheap and certain transport to market — were precisely the conditions that had dogged Arigna since its founding in 1788 and that would continue to dog it, under a long succession of owners, until the final abandonment of iron-smelting there in 1838. The report thus stands as a moment of clear-eyed assessment within a longer story of speculative ambition repeatedly outrunning Ireland's industrial infrastructure.

The essay proceeds in five parts. The first situates the Arigna works within the wider context of Irish industrial promotion in the late eighteenth century. The second examines the substance of Guest's report: his account of the iron-stone, coal and limestone resources, his assessment of the existing plant, and his recommendations for new investment. The third considers his profitability estimates and what they reveal about contemporary assumptions regarding labour, transport and markets. The fourth traces the works' aftermath in more detail — La Touche's failure to act on Guest's advice, the works' collapse in 1808, and the long and often turbulent history of the site under successive owners and lessees through the 1840s. A final section sets out, in a deliberately plain and accessible style, the story of the most notorious episode in that later history: the 1827 parliamentary inquiry into fraud at the Arigna Mining Company, a scandal that touched several sitting Members of

Parliament and that forms an instructive coda to Guest's own sober assessment of the site two decades earlier.

II. The Arigna Works before Guest: Promotion, Debt, and Rebellion

The iron-stone and coal deposits of the Arigna valley, straddling the modern border of Roscommon and Leitrim on the western shore of Lough Allen, had attracted intermittent exploitation since at least the early seventeenth century, when charcoal-fired works were established in the area; these closed before 1700 as the surrounding woodlands were exhausted, a pattern repeated across much of Ireland's early modern iron industry.

The works that Guest inspected in 1804 had their origin in a quite different and more deliberately promotional enterprise of the 1780s. Colonel Thomas Tenison of Castle Tenison, who owned land on the western side of the lake, sought to exploit its coal and iron-stone and in 1784 leased ground at Aughabehy to Mary O'Reilly, a Dublin widow, for the erection of an iron manufactory, reserving to himself a royalty of two shillings per ton on any coal raised.[2] Her son Thomas O'Reilly, an iron merchant who had already petitioned the Irish House of Commons in 1781 for assistance with a separate metalworking scheme near Lucan, County Dublin, became, together with his brothers Patrick and Andrew, the effective promoter of the Arigna venture. The brothers situated their appeal for support within the broader contemporary case for Irish

[2]Susan Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century' (DCU School of History and Geography), pp. 2–3, citing Jane Donovan, 'Henry Foxall and the Arigna Ironworks' in Breifne, 38 (2002), p. 499.

industrial self-sufficiency: petitioning the Irish House of Commons in 1786 and again in 1789 for grants of £10,000, they argued that a domestic iron industry would lessen Ireland's dependence on imported wrought iron from Russia, Sweden and England, and would furnish a practical justification for the projected canal linking the Shannon to the Liffey. Parliament never voted the requested sum. A committee chaired by Sir Edward Crofton did recommend a smaller grant of £3,000 in 1790, while expressing dismay that "two right Honourable gentlemen, in high office, had set their faces against aiding this undertaking"; in the event, Parliament preferred instead to address the problem indirectly, through tariffs on imported iron.[3]

The O'Reillys nonetheless pressed ahead on their own resources, investing some £21,000 of their own capital by 1790 and recruiting experienced ironworkers from Britain, including Henry Foxall, who brought knowledge of Henry Cort's recently invented puddling process for converting pig iron into wrought bar without charcoal. By the early 1790s the works employed over three hundred people and had become, briefly, the nucleus of an industrial settlement in a remote part of Roscommon, drawing local people into mining, carting and ancillary trades. But the enterprise was chronically undercapitalised relative to its ambitions, and the O'Reillys borrowed heavily from the La Touche banking house in Dublin to keep it afloat. When they defaulted on a £10,000 loan, they were declared bankrupt in 1793, and Peter La Touche purchased the property out of the Court of Chancery for some £25,000 — a purchase that also served, not incidentally, to consolidate his family's

[3]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 3, quoting The Journals of the House of Commons for the Kingdom of Ireland, 1789–90, ix, p. 178.

standing in a county he had represented in Parliament until losing his seat in 1790.

La Touche's ownership began inauspiciously and grew worse. In June 1795, amid the agrarian and political unrest that would culminate in the 1798 rebellion, Thomas O'Reilly — by then a member of the United Irishmen — led an armed seizure of the works together with members of the Defenders, the agrarian secret society then active against tithes and low agricultural wages. The works' own stock of iron made them a natural target: O'Reilly and his men are recorded as having manufactured six hundred pikes in a single day for the Defenders' use.[4] Guest's report makes no mention of this episode, but it forms an important part of the context for the dilapidated state of the plant that he found nine years later: the works had not only suffered the ordinary neglect of an absentee, financially disengaged proprietor, but had also been physically fought over during a period of acute political violence. La Touche, for his part, is reported to have remarked that the only tangible benefit he derived from his Arigna investment was the iron gates of his house at Bellevue, County Wicklow — gates said to have cost him, in the wry reckoning of one later account, some £80,000 by the measure of what the entire Arigna investment had returned him.[5]

It was in this context of an enterprise already a decade into decline, owned by a proprietor with declining enthusiasm for the project, that

[4]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 4, citing Liam Kelly, A Flame Now Quenched (Dublin, 1998), pp. 60–61.
[5]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 4, citing Turlough O'Riordan, 'La Touche, Peter' in James McGuire and James Quinn (eds), Dictionary of Irish Biography (Cambridge, 2009).

Guest was engaged in 1804. The choice of Guest was not arbitrary: the Dowlais works in Glamorganshire occupied a broadly similar physical situation to Arigna, a remote upland site combining coal, iron-stone and limestone, and Guest had a demonstrable record of having made such a combination commercially successful in Wales. La Touche evidently hoped that Guest's expertise might identify what local management at Arigna had failed to achieve.

III. Guest's Survey: Resources, Plant, and Recommendations

Guest's report is organised with the practical clarity one would expect of a working ironmaster rather than a literary man. He begins with the geology and topography of the site, locating the works on the west side of Lough Allen and the Arigna river, at the southern end of the mountain called Brahlieve (Bracklieve). He identifies several distinct veins of iron-stone — those nearest the works by the riverside already being worked by local inhabitants, with further strata at Altagowlan on the eastern side of the Arigna, and others nearer the top of the mountain. He is careful throughout to distinguish what he observed directly from what he was told by others regarding ownership and accessibility, a distinction that lends his report an evidentiary caution appropriate to its purpose as advice to an investor.

On coal, Guest's account is markedly more guarded. Only one workable seam had then been identified on the mountain, raised at a place called Aughabehe by means of pits without a proper level, several of which were so waterlogged as to be unworkable. A level had been driven at considerable depth below the vein but had been, in Guest's word, "injudiciously" executed, with part of it fallen in and full of water and

rubbish; he doubted whether it could ever be rendered serviceable without the construction of an entirely new level, which he estimated would cost some £500 to £600. A second coal seam, recently sunk at a place called the Rover on the Brahlieve mountain, appeared more promising — Guest had seen samples of this coal coked and used in the works' cupola, where it melted the iron "very quick and well," which he took as a favourable indication of its quality — but he was careful to note that he could speak only to what he had directly observed, not to the seam's extent or long-term reliability.

This caution about the coal supply is significant, because the entire commercial logic of Arigna depended upon it. The site's appeal lay precisely in the unusual conjunction of coal, iron-stone and limestone within carting distance of one another — a conjunction rare enough in Ireland to have justified, in principle, the establishment of a coke-fired blast furnace of the kind pioneered in Britain by Abraham Darby earlier in the century, rather than the older and more land-intensive charcoal-fired process. Guest's report makes clear that this much-advertised conjunction of resources was, on inspection, considerably less secure than the enterprise's promoters had represented: the coal seams were thin, imperfectly explored, prone to flooding, and inconsistent in quality, with the smaller coal at Aughabehe deemed unfit for furnace use when mixed with the surrounding slate.

Turning to the existing plant, Guest describes a blast furnace forty-four feet high and twelve feet wide at the bosh, blown by an overshot water-wheel twenty-six feet in diameter together with two cast-iron blowing cylinders, and supplemented — necessitated, in fact, by the insufficiency

of the water supply, which depended only on "droppings" from the Brahlieve mountain — by a double steam engine built on Boulton and Watt's construction. This engine, however, he found "injudiciously completed" and now entirely out of repair, its beams broken and requiring replacement before it could again be put to work. He judged the necessary repairs, including a new air-pump and condenser, the wear and tear on so small a cylinder relative to its task, to be so costly in coal, oil and labour as to be "excessive," and recommended instead that a new level be cut to bring the Arigna river itself into the furnace pool, a project he estimated at some £1,000 and which he believed would supply sufficient water to work two furnaces rather than one.[6]

His account of the "Lower Works" — the forge, refining hearth, shingling hammer and slitting mill situated downstream of the furnace — is still more dispiriting. The water-wheels were, with one exception, entirely down; the cog-wheels, being made of wood with wooden cogs, were judged nearly decayed from disuse; and Guest concluded bluntly that the forge was "ill adapted to the present improved method of making Bar Iron," such that very few of its shafts, if any, would come back into use. He recommended, in effect, an almost complete reconstruction: new fineries, puddling-furnaces, bloom-furnaces, water-wheels, cog-wheels and fly-wheels, new beds, standards and rolls, and the implements necessary for producing bar iron, boiler-plates, nail-rods or hoops, should trial determine that the local ore was suited to such

[6] Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810), p.6.

products.[7]

Even the workers' accommodation came in for criticism. Guest found the largest of the existing houses too small for a family man, comprising only two small parlours, a kitchen and three bedrooms, and situated, moreover, on a level with the coke-yard such that it would be "annoyed" by smoke from the coke-hearths to the point of being scarcely habitable. He recommended building a new manager's house on the flat meadow on the far side of the Arigna river, once the bridge had been repaired, so that the manager might have, in his words, "a view of what was going forward at all times" — a small but telling detail suggesting Guest's diagnosis extended to problems of supervision and management discipline, and not merely to physical plant.

Guest's total reckoning of the capital required was substantial. He valued the existing buildings, machinery and infrastructure — exclusive of stock — at £20,000, and estimated that rendering the upper works complete, including new mine-kilns, a new furnace, coke-ovens, levels, roads, drams and tools, would itself require investment on a comparable scale, with a further £20,000 needed for a new manager's house and additional workmen's housing. The cumulative figure implied by his report — perhaps £30,000 to £40,000 in new capital, set against an enterprise into which the O'Reillys and La Touche had already sunk some £45,000 to £46,000 without commercial success — represented a very considerable further commitment for a single proprietor to make on the strength of

[7] Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810), pp. 7-8.

one consultant's survey.

IV. The Arithmetic of Optimism: Costs, Prices, and the Problem of Transport

The second half of Guest's report consists of detailed cost estimates for producing pig iron, finer's metal, puddled bars and bar iron, each broken down into its constituent charges for coal, iron-stone, limestone, labour and incidental expenses. These tables are of considerable interest to the economic historian, both for what they reveal about contemporary ironmaking costs in the Irish midlands and for the assumptions embedded within them. Guest reckoned the cost of producing a ton of pig iron at Arigna at £4 15s., rising through refining and puddling to £8 18s. for a ton of finished bar iron — figures he believed compared favourably with the prices then current at ironworks in Scotland and with the prices paid by Dublin founders, who were, he noted, supplied at considerable expense from works as distant as Scotland itself.[8]

Having established his production costs, Guest turned to the question of markets, on which he was careful to disclaim particular expertise, writing that he "must be excused saying anything respecting the consumption, demand, conveyance, or market," being a stranger to local conditions and obliged to take La Touche's assurances of plentiful demand at face value. This is a significant qualification. Guest's optimism about Arigna's profitability — he stated plainly that he had "not the least doubt of the works turning out to a good account," and offered, as a token of his

[8] Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810), pp. 9-10.

confidence, to take a share in the concern himself — rested on an assumption he explicitly declined to verify: that the iron, once made, could readily be sold.

His treatment of transport is correspondingly the most consequential, and most fragile, element of the entire calculation. Guest proposed that, should the iron not sell at the works themselves, the most practicable route to market would be to carry it some eighteen miles overland to the port of Sligo, at an estimated cost of 15s. per ton including weighing and wharfage. His authority for this figure was an analogy: at Dowlais, prior to the construction of the Glamorganshire Canal linking Merthyr to Cardiff, iron had been carried on horseback over the hills a distance of twenty-four miles for 13s. per ton. On this basis, and assuming two furnaces capable of producing sixty tons of pig iron per week — a rate he had been informed was attainable — Guest calculated an annual output of some 3,120 tons of pig iron, which, sold half as best-quality dark grey iron and half as inferior metal, would yield a gross profit in the region of £6,240 to £7,280 per annum if sold as pig iron, or as much as £11,919 if converted to bar iron and sold in Dublin at the then-prevailing price of £20 per ton.[9]

These were striking figures, and it is not difficult to see why La Touche might have found them encouraging. Yet the entire structure of the calculation depended on two assumptions that Guest's own report, read carefully, calls into question. The first was that the coal supply — already

[9] Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810), p.11.

shown in the earlier section of the report to be thin, imperfectly proven and partly flooded — could sustain two furnaces at sixty tons per week for fifty-two weeks of the year, a rate of consumption considerably beyond anything the works had yet achieved. The second was that eighteen miles of mountain road between Arigna and Sligo, much of it without the benefit of the canal infrastructure that had transformed Dowlais's fortunes, could bear the same cost per ton as a comparable Welsh route — an analogy that took no account of the very different state of road-building, cartage availability, and agricultural "provender" (Guest's own term for the fodder needed to keep horses through the Irish winter) prevailing in early nineteenth-century Connaught. Guest in fact registered some awareness of this latter difficulty, noting elsewhere in the report that the price of carrying coal and limestone to the furnace bank was already "subject to the like inconvenience" of advancing further as the consumption becomes regular and the fodder scarcer to keep horses in the winter.[10]

Read in this light, the profitability estimates of the report's concluding pages stand in some tension with the cautious, empirically grounded survey that precedes them. Guest the surveyor reported what he had seen: flooded pits, a ruined level, a steam engine out of repair, a forge unfit for modern bar-iron production. Guest the consultant, perhaps mindful of his commission and of the conventions of the genre in which he was writing, concluded with an arithmetic of optimism built upon resources he had just finished describing as uncertain. This is not to accuse Guest of bad faith — his explicit disclaimers regarding demand

[10]Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810), pp. 5–6.

and market conditions suggest a degree of professional candour — but it does suggest that the report functioned, in part, as a piece of investment promotion as much as dispassionate technical assessment, a duality not uncommon in the literature of industrial improvement in this period.

V. Aftermath: Non-Implementation, Collapse, and the Long Shadow of Arigna

Despite the confidence of its concluding pages, Guest's report appears never to have been substantially acted upon. The scale of further investment required — on the order of the sums already lost at Arigna over the previous two decades — evidently exceeded La Touche's appetite for renewed commitment to an enterprise that had already cost him dearly in money and, during the rebellion of 1795, in physical security.[11] Richard Griffith, surveying the Connaught coalfield for the Royal Dublin Society in 1814 and repeating his findings before a House of Commons committee in 1824, offered a retrospective judgment at variance with the popular explanation that high transport costs alone had doomed the works: Griffith noted that, in fact, no iron from Arigna had ever been carried to Dublin at all, the entire output having been sold locally as bar iron or domestic castings, and attributed the enterprise's failure instead to its excessive initial outlay and to the frequent turnover of managers.[12]

Whatever the precise balance of causes, the works were abandoned in

[11]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 5.

[12]Richard Griffith, Geology and Mining Survey of the Connaught Coal District in Ireland (Dublin, 1818), p. 61; Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 5.

1808, within four years of Guest's visit.[13] The property then lay largely idle for over a decade. By the early 1820s, according to the later testimony of John Schneider — a London businessman who would himself become entangled in the Arigna Mining Company affair discussed below — the La Touche family had grown thoroughly weary of the burden: in Schneider's own words, given in evidence to the 1827 parliamentary inquiry, the La Touches "were worn out, and they were glad to get it into the hands of any person."[14]

It was this weariness that opened the way for the works' next, and stranger, chapter. In early 1824 a Dublin architect — variously described in contemporary sources as a civil engineer and a former civil servant — named Roger Flattery approached the La Touches with an offer to look after the derelict premises and to raise coal from the adjacent pits. He was duly granted a lease of the property, and almost immediately set about a quite different enterprise from the patient industrial rebuilding that Guest had recommended twenty years before: rather than seeking the very large capital sums Guest had judged necessary, Flattery sought to convert his lease, as quickly and profitably as possible, into a stake in a London joint-stock company.[15]

In June 1824, Flattery travelled to London and proposed his scheme to Sir William Congreve, the Member of Parliament for Plymouth and a man already well known to the public as the inventor of the Congreve

[13]Isaac Weld, Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon (Dublin, 1832), p. 39.
[14]House of Commons Select Committee on the Arigna Mining Company, 1826–27, p. 295; Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 5.
[15]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', pp. 5–6.

war rocket. Congreve in turn brought in two brothers, Henry and Joseph Clarke, with whom he sat as a fellow director of the Equitable Loan Company. Between them, Flattery and the Clarkes agreed a price of £10,000 for the Arigna lease — and then, within weeks, arranged for a newly formed company, the Arigna Iron and Coal Company, to purchase the very same property from intermediate trustees for £25,000, the difference of £15,000 being divided in secret among Congreve, the Clarkes and a circle of associates, entirely unknown to the investors who would soon be invited to buy shares in the new concern. The full mechanics of this scheme — and its unravelling before a House of Commons Select Committee in 1827 — are addressed at length in the final section of this.

The Arigna Mining Company's own efforts to revive the works between 1825 and 1831 proved no more successful, in practical industrial terms, than La Touche's had been, for reasons that would have been entirely familiar to Guest. A colony of engineers and workmen was brought over from England in 1824, the coal and iron mines were reopened, and 230 tons of iron were manufactured between November 1825 and May 1826 — at an expense, however, of £8 4s. per ton, well above any of the costs Guest had projected two decades earlier. The furnace then became choked, smelting was discontinued, and the works were left to decay while the company's affairs descended into the prolonged Chancery suit and parliamentary scandal recounted below.

Amid this institutional chaos, violence again touched the valley, as it had in 1795. In February 1828, Captain Cox, the company's resident mining manager, was shot dead at his own home near the works by a group of

armed men. Contemporary newspapers offered conflicting explanations, linking the killing variously to a dispute over a local Catholic church the company had built on mine ground, to a case of mistaken identity connected with the trial of the priest Father Thomas Maguire, and to the broader currents of agrarian secret-society activity, or "Ribbonism," then unsettling the district.[16] Whatever its precise cause, the murder is a stark reminder that the Arigna valley in this period remained, as it had been in the 1790s, a place where industrial promotion, absentee ownership and genuine local hardship coexisted uneasily, and sometimes violently.

Roger Flattery himself proved the most durable figure in the entire saga. Even after the Arigna Mining Company's collapse in 1831, Flattery retained, through a quirk in the drafting of the company's own enabling Act of Parliament, a legal right to remain on the land; in 1836 he restarted the iron-works on his own account, acting as manager, and by 1837 a fresh survey valued the rebuilt works at £33,000.[17] Flattery discovered, in practice, what Guest's report might have predicted: that there was a more reliable local market for coal than for iron. His lease technically permitted him to raise coal only for his own domestic use, but witnesses later testified that he raised and sold far more than any household could consume, and his evident profiteering — combined with his refusal to pay rent or royalties, and his neglect of the property — earned him, in the memory of the valley, the nickname "the Invincible."[18]

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[16]The Times, 4 March 1828, p. 3; Sligo Journal, 4 March 1828, p. 4; Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', pp. 9–10.

[17]G. H. Kinahan, Economic Geology of Ireland (Dublin, 1889), p. 73; Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', pp. 13–14.

[18]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', pp. 14–16.

The final attempt to dislodge Flattery and revive the Arigna enterprise on a sound footing came in 1841, when Robert White, a businessman who had married into local landed wealth, formed a small consortium to purchase the works from the by-then defunct Arigna Iron and Coal Company. What followed was less an industrial revival than a protracted and at times physically dangerous legal siege: Flattery resisted ejection through the courts, his son Thomas was convicted of assaulting White at the works in 1842, and in October of that year a conspiracy to murder White himself was uncovered, its instigators narrowly acquitted by a jury despite what White's own solicitors regarded as compelling evidence.[19] White ultimately prevailed by the simple expedient of exhausting Flattery's finances through repeated litigation rather than by any decisive legal victory, gaining full possession of the works only in the early 1840s. By 1851, however, White's own Arigna Company had likewise failed, leaving the original Arigna Iron and Coal Company — itself never formally wound up until a new Act under Queen Victoria permitted it in the 1850s — as a kind of zombie corporate entity presiding over a property that, by every reasonable commercial measure, no one had yet succeeded in making pay.[20]

Iron-smelting at Arigna ceased for good in 1838, during Flattery's own brief tenure as manager, and was never seriously attempted again, although a final, short-lived attempt to produce iron was made nearby at Creevelea as late as 1898. Coal mining alone continued at Arigna, fitfully

[19]Roscommon and Leitrim Gazette, 8 April 1843, p. 2; Roscommon Journal, and Western Impartial Reporter, 15 April 1843, p. 3; Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', pp. 16–18.

[20]Belfast News-Letter, 15 December 1851, p. 4; Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', p. 18.

and on a small scale through the nineteenth century, before being revived in the twentieth century to supply, from 1958, an ESB power station; the mines finally closed in 1990, bringing to an end almost exactly two centuries of intermittent industrial activity in the valley that Guest had surveyed in a single week in October 1804.

Viewed across this longer span, Guest's report of 1804 occupies an instructive middle position in the Arigna story: written a decade after the O'Reillys' bankruptcy and two decades before the Flattery–Congreve scandal, it represents the one moment in the enterprise's troubled history at which a genuinely qualified outside expert was engaged to assess the works on their technical merits, rather than on the promotional or speculative grounds that had governed both its founding and its later revival. That even Guest's measured optimism failed to translate into renewed investment — and that the underlying technical deficiencies he identified (uncertain coal, an inadequate water supply, a forge unfit for modern methods, and above all the absence of cheap transport to market) proved just as intractable for every subsequent owner of the site — suggests that Arigna's difficulties were not primarily a matter of poor management or insufficient expertise, as Griffith's 1814 diagnosis implied, but were rooted in the more fundamental mismatch between the capital intensity of coke-fired ironmaking and the infrastructural and economic conditions of early nineteenth-century Connaught.

VI. Conclusion

Thomas Guest's Report of the Arigna Iron-Works is, in the first instance, a valuable primary source for the technical and economic history of early industrial Ireland: it offers a detailed snapshot, by a competent

contemporary observer, of furnace technology, mining methods, labour organisation and production costs at a remote ironworks in the west of Ireland at the close of the Napoleonic period. But its significance extends beyond the merely descriptive. Read against the documented history of the Arigna enterprise before and after Guest's visit, the report illuminates a recurring pattern in Irish industrial promotion of this era: the gap between the genuine mineral promise of a site — the rare and, on paper, attractive conjunction of coal, iron-stone and limestone that drew the O'Reillys, La Touche, Guest, and later the promoters of the Arigna Mining Company to the same remote valley across half a century — and the practical conditions of capital, transport, and management discipline necessary to realise that promise.

Guest's own report contains, in embryo, an explanation for why Arigna would continue to fail under one set of owners after another: a thin and uncertain coal supply, decayed and undercapitalised infrastructure, a workforce and forge ill-suited to current methods of production, and a transport problem that his own optimistic arithmetic could not fully disguise. That a director of one of the most successful ironworks in Britain could survey these conditions, propose a substantial and not unreasonable programme of remedial investment, and still see his recommendations come to nothing, speaks less to any individual failure of judgment — whether his own or La Touche's — than to the structural difficulty of transplanting the capital-intensive coke-iron industry of south Wales onto the periphery of the Irish economy. In this sense, the 1804 report stands not merely as a record of one ironworks at one moment, but as a case study in the broader limits of "improvement" as an organising ideal of Irish economic development in the late Georgian

period: a programme repeatedly proposed, periodically refinanced, and consistently undone by the same underlying conditions that no individual survey, however competent, could resolve.

The episode that brought this pattern most fully into public view, however, was not industrial but financial: the speculative flotation, scandal and parliamentary inquiry that overtook the Arigna Mining Company in the mid-1820s. Because that affair involves a different cast of characters, a different kind of evidence, and a story more about the City of London than about the iron-stone of Brahlieve mountain, it is told separately, and more simply, in the section that follows.

VII. The 1827 Select Committee Inquiry into the Arigna Mining Company

The story told so far has been about engineering and money: about furnaces, coal seams, and whether Arigna could ever be made to pay. The next part of the story is different. It is about a fraud, committed not in Roscommon but in London, by men who mostly never set foot in the valley at all. This section tells that story in plain terms.

How the company was formed

By 1824, Roger Flattery held the lease of the old Arigna works. He wanted to make money from it quickly, so he went to London to find investors. There he met Sir William Congreve, a Member of Parliament famous for inventing a military rocket. Congreve brought in two brothers, Henry and Joseph Clarke, who were experienced at organising

companies.[21] The four men agreed that Flattery would sell his lease for £10,000. They then planned to set up a brand-new company, sell shares to the public, and have that company buy the same lease for £25,000. The £15,000 difference would be split quietly between Congreve, the Clarkes, and a small circle of friends — without telling anyone who bought shares in the company.

This was the heart of the fraud. The investing public were told they were buying into a company that had purchased a promising Irish mine for £25,000. What they were not told was that this £25,000 was not the real price. The real price was £10,000. The other £15,000 was simply profit for the small group of insiders who had set the deal up — money taken from the company's own funds before a single share had been sold to an outsider.

Hiding the money

To hide what they had done, the promoters needed the official paperwork to look ordinary. Lawyers drew up a deed that made it appear as though Flattery had sold the property directly to the company for £25,000, with no mention of Congreve, the Clarkes, or the secret £15,000 at all.[22] The Committee later said this version of events was "directly and palpably false," since Flattery never actually received the full £25,000 himself. The deeds were also dated 30 October 1824, even though they were not actually signed and completed until the middle of

[21]Report from the Select Committee on the Arigna Mining Company, together with the Minutes of Evidence (House of Commons Sessional Papers, no. 234, 1827), pp. 3–5 [hereafter 'Select Committee Report'].
[22]Select Committee Report, pp. 7–9.

December — seven weeks later. When the Committee asked why, the answers they received were, in their own words, "so unsatisfactory as only to occasion new perplexity."[23]

Once the money had been raised, it was shared out in cash rather than by cheque, so that there would be no paper trail through the banks. At one board meeting, in January 1825, Henry Clarke handed each director a small paper parcel. Inside was £1,047 in banknotes and gold coins. Almost nobody asked where the money had come from. Indeed, the directors were so untroubled that they later agreed to club together and buy Henry Clarke a presentation gift, as a thank-you for organising the company — without yet knowing that the gift was being paid for, in effect, with the very money he had just handed them in secret.

A company built on false promises

The fraud over the £15,000 was not the only problem. The company's own advertising, called a prospectus, told investors that the Arigna property was as good as freehold land and that the company had full rights to work both the coal and the iron there.[24] This was not true. Several other parties — including the Tenison family, who had originally owned the land, and Peter La Touche himself — still held rights over parts of the mines and a share of any future profits. The company did not, in fact, have an unrestricted right to work the coal at all. One witness, a London merchant named John Schneider who was asked to invest early on but refused, put it simply: "Viewing the concern as a man of business, I should say it was worth nothing; I would not have

[23]Select Committee Report, p. 9.
[24]Select Committee Report, pp. 11–12.

embarked a penny upon such an undertaking."[25] Despite hearing this warning, Congreve and the others went ahead anyway, lending their respected names to a scheme they had been told was flawed.

Who was to blame

The Select Committee, made up of Members of Parliament, had the difficult job of judging the conduct of their own colleagues. They did not treat everyone the same way. Henry Clarke, who had organised the deeds and controlled the share allotments, was judged the most clearly at fault. The Committee described him as "acute and cautious" in business, which made it hard to believe he had acted by accident.[26]

Sir William Congreve received the harshest personal criticism of all, even though the Committee could not prove he had planned the fraud himself. He had been warned in advance that the company's title to the mines was doubtful, yet he wrote privately that he expected to be able to launch the company "with éclat, though there may be some flaw in the titles." The Committee judged this comment severely, saying that to launch a company with confidence while knowing its foundations were flawed was "to bring it out with false colours."[27] Worse, when the fraud began to come to light in 1825, Congreve discouraged a fellow director from asking awkward questions in public, and he agreed to the destruction of a document that might have proved embarrassing. The Committee concluded that, even if Congreve had not known every detail of the fraud, he had known enough that he could not fairly claim

[25]Select Committee Report, p. 15.
[26]Select Committee Report, p. 10.
[27]Select Committee Report, pp. 16–17.

innocence. They summed him up as guilty of either "a too ready dismissal of scruples" or "a want of sufficient sensibility to obligations."[28]

Two other Members of Parliament involved, John Bent and James Brogden, were treated more gently. The Committee accepted that they had not known about the original £15,000 fraud, and had genuinely believed the cash they received was simply payment for shares they were entitled to. But the Committee still criticised them for not asking more questions before pocketing an unexplained sum of money, and for failing to hand it back once the truth came out.[29] One of their fellow directors, Mr Morgan, had refused the same payment from the very start, and later gave the Committee a blunt verdict on Brogden's decision to keep the money even after the fraud was exposed: "a burglar would have done the same thing."[30]

What happened next

Word of the scandal spread quickly. Arigna shares, which had at one point sold for as much as £26 above their original price, collapsed in value to around £3, even though shareholders had already paid £12 per share into the company.[31] The original directors were voted out by angry shareholders in 1826. Sir William Congreve later fled to France, where he died in 1828, shortly after being found guilty of fraud in his absence by the Lord Chancellor. A long legal case in the Court of Chancery eventually forced the Clarke brothers and others to repay the missing

[28]Select Committee Report, p. 19.
[29]Select Committee Report, pp. 21–22.
[30]Select Committee Report, p. 22.
[31]Select Committee Report, p. 27.

£15,000, though this was not finally settled until 1831.[32]

The Arigna affair never produced a criminal trial of its own, but it became a well-known example, at the time, of everything that could go wrong with the new joint-stock companies then being formed across Britain and Ireland. There were, in the 1820s, no laws requiring companies to disclose a promoter's own hidden profits, no independent checks on how directors handed out shares, and no real penalty for trading on a famous name rather than a sound business. The Arigna case helped show why such rules were needed, and it is remembered today partly for that reason: not as a story about Irish iron or Irish coal at all, but as a clear and well-documented example of how easily trust could be abused in the freewheeling company markets of early nineteenth-century Britain.

VIII. Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the two halves of this essay tell a single, continuous story about the Arigna iron-works, even though they are told in two different registers. Thomas Guest's report of 1804 is a careful, technical document, written by an expert who genuinely believed the works could be saved if enough capital and discipline were applied. The 1827 Select Committee inquiry is a very different kind of document: a record of how, twenty years later, the same site became not a manufacturing problem to be solved by engineering, but a financial opportunity to be exploited by promoters who had little real interest in making iron at all. Both documents, in their own way, illustrate the same underlying truth about

[32]Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works', pp. 8–9.

Arigna: that the gap between the valley's genuine mineral promise and the practical, financial and moral discipline needed to realise it was never closed, by any of the many hands — honest or otherwise — that tried.

Note on Sources

Note on sources: the narrative of the Arigna enterprise's founding, ownership and aftermath presented in the main body of this essay draws extensively on Susan Hegarty, 'The Arigna iron and coal works during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century' (DCU School of History and Geography, n.d.), which is itself grounded in the Journals of the House of Commons for the Kingdom of Ireland, the evidence of the House of Commons Select Committee on the Arigna Mining Company (1826–27), Isaac Weld's Statistical Survey of the County of Roscommon (Dublin, 1832), contemporary newspaper reports, and the White papers and National Archives Chancery material (MS C101/4777 and related series) cited therein. Richard Griffith's retrospective judgment on the causes of the works' 1808 failure is drawn from his Geology and Mining Survey of the Connaught Coal District in Ireland (Dublin, 1818). All quotations from the 1804 report itself are taken from Thomas Guest, Report of the Arigna Iron-Works, in Ireland (Dublin, 1810). The simplified account of the 1827 Select Committee inquiry draws directly on the Report from the Select Committee on the Arigna Mining Company, together with the Minutes of Evidence taken before them (House of Commons Sessional Papers, no. 234, 1827), supplemented by Hegarty's narrative of the affair's longer aftermath.

PART THREE

Landlordism, Coercion, and Resistance

Partisan Violence and Community Fracture: The Sligo Elections of 1837, Electoral and Social History of Pre-Famine Connaught

I. Introduction: The Return and Its Origins

The general election of 1837, called on the accession of Queen Victoria, was contested across Ireland with exceptional bitterness. The Whig–Liberal alliance that Daniel O'Connell had brokered with the government clashed everywhere with a Tory establishment determined to hold its ground, and in few places did that contest turn as violent as in the county and borough of Sligo. For the better part of a month in the summer of 1837 the ordinary life of the town and its hinterland gave way to something close to open faction war.[1] That episode is recoverable in unusual detail because it became, briefly, a question for Parliament. A return ordered by the House of Commons on 12 December 1837: 'A Return of all Reports of Outrages made to the Inspector-General of Police by the Constabulary Officers, during the late Elections for the County and Borough of Sligo', preserves a day-by-day ledger of the disorder between 24 July and 19 August 1837. Compiled from the daily reports of the local constabulary and signed off at Dublin Castle, the document was a bureaucratic artefact rather than a narrative; yet in its dry chronological listing of broken windows, wrecked drays, and beaten clergymen it records, almost inadvertently, the anatomy of a community

[1] On the Whig–O'Connell alliance of the 1830s see Angus Macintyre, The Liberator: Daniel O'Connell and the Irish Party, 1830–1847 (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), pp. 105–43; K. Theodore Hoppen, Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 1–32.

at war with itself.[2]

Read against the grain of the partisan purpose for which it was procured, the return discloses a society fractured along three intersecting lines—political, sectarian, and economic—and a franchise that, under the open ballot, was exercised as much through intimidation as through persuasion. This essay reconstructs that picture in turn: the two candidates whose rivalry organised the violence; the reformed executive that recorded it; and the several registers—electoral, economic, sectarian, and domestic—in which coercion was applied across the town and its surrounding roads. A second section examines the military intervention ordered by Major Browne during the county election of 14 August, which generated a formal inquiry, a parliamentary memorial, and a sharply contested executive verdict that together illuminate the structural tensions between local society and the centralising Dublin Castle administration.

II. The Combatants: Perceval and Somers

The Sligo contest of 1837 was shaped by the opposition of two men who between them embodied the larger struggle then convulsing Irish politics: Colonel Alexander Perceval, representative of the entrenched Conservative and Protestant interest, and John Patrick Somers, candidate of the resurgent Liberal and O'Connellite cause.

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[2]House of Commons Return, "A Return of all Reports of Outrages made to the Inspector-General of Police by the Constabulary Officers, during the late Elections for the County and Borough of Sligo," ordered 12 December 1837 (hereafter Sligo Return). Unless otherwise stated, all specific incidents cited in this essay are drawn from the Sligo Return.

Perceval (1787–1858) was a Tory landlord of the old stamp, seated at Temple House, near Ballymote in the south of the county, where his family had held land since the seventeenth century. Member of Parliament for County Sligo through the 1830s, and afterwards Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Lords, he stood for the Protestant ascendancy and the Anglo-Irish landed interest at their most assured. His prominence made him a natural object of popular hostility; the return records that he was jostled and tripped as he entered the Sligo court-house on 3 August.[3] It was Perceval, too, who afterwards used his standing in the Commons to call for the return itself, intending the catalogue of outrage as a weapon against his opponents; a partisan origin that the document has long since outlived.

Somers, the Liberal candidate for the borough of Sligo, drew his strength from O'Connell's organisation and from a mobilised body of Catholic and reforming voters, and his victory in 1837 marked a real breach in the local Conservative ascendancy. His name became the crowd's rallying cry: the mob that waylaid the Tory-aligned Dadwell Palmer demanded that he shout 'Huzza for Somers!' on pain of a beating.[4] It would be a mistake, however, to cast Somers simply as the candidate of an aggrieved populace. He was himself among the most violent and corrupt figures of the unreformed Irish electoral system; his Sligo campaigns were repeatedly dogged by allegations of fictitious votes, abduction, and

[3]On Perceval see The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–1832, ed. R. G. Thorne (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986). On Temple House and the Perceval interest in Sligo see Terence Dooley, The Decline of the Big House in Ireland (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001).
[4] Sligo Return, p.1.

intimidation, and the borough he represented was so notoriously venal that it was eventually disfranchised for corruption in 1870. The violence the return documents was not the work of one side alone.[5]

III. The Executive Apparatus: Dublin Castle and the Reformed Constabulary

The authority of the return rests on its provenance. It was compiled at the Constabulary Office and signed at Dublin Castle on 19 February 1838 by the Inspector-General of Constabulary, James Shaw Kennedy. Its very existence reflects a particular moment in the modernisation of Irish policing. The chain of reporting ran downward from the Castle executive, presided over by the Under-Secretary, Thomas Drummond; through the Constabulary Office in Dublin, under Shaw Kennedy as Inspector-General; to the county and borough officers in Sligo, whose daily logs of outrage between July and August 1837 supplied the raw material.[6]

Each link in that chain was new. The Constabulary (Ireland) Act of 1836 had consolidated the older provincial forces into a single, centralised body under one Inspector-General, and Shaw Kennedy, its first holder, spent his brief tenure forging a disciplined and bureaucratic force capable of impartial reporting. Above him, Drummond brought to the administration a reformist temper famously distilled in his admonition

[5]On Somers and the subsequent disfranchisement of Sligo Borough see Parliamentary Papers, Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Existence of Corrupt Practices at the Borough of Sligo, HC 1870 (226), xxix.

[6]Constabulary (Ireland) Act, 6 & 7 Will. IV c. 13 (1836). On the formation of the Irish Constabulary see Galen Broeker, Rural Disorder and Police Reform in Ireland, 1812–36 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 200–35; Brian Griffin, The Bulkies: Police and Crime in Belfast, 1800–1865 (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1997).

that ‘property has its duties as well as its rights’—a signal that the machinery of the state would no longer be placed automatically at the disposal of the landlord interest.[7] The meticulous, chronological logging of every smashed window and assaulted minister in the Sligo return is itself a product of this new professional apparatus.

That claim to neutrality was, however, fiercely contested from both sides. Conservatives such as Perceval complained that Dublin Castle was indulgent towards O’Connellite agitation and slow to furnish the military protection that Tory voters required; Liberals retorted that the local magistracy, overwhelmingly composed of Tory landlords, turned the constabulary into an instrument for intimidating the Catholic electorate. The return thus captures the state at an awkward juncture—attempting to measure, in the language of bureaucratic impartiality, a violence rooted in the very social and religious divisions it could not itself resolve.

IV. The Anatomy of Political Coercion

The disorder recorded in the return was not random rioting but a repertoire of targeted, tactical manoeuvres directed at the outcome of the poll. Under the open ballot then in force, a voter’s choice was a public act, known to landlord, neighbour, and crowd alike; intimidation was, in consequence, a rational and economical means of both securing and suppressing votes.[8]

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[7]On Shaw Kennedy see Dictionary of National Biography (London: Smith, Elder, 1885–1900); on his role in organising the Constabulary see Broeker, Rural Disorder, pp. 228–35.

[8]On the open ballot and its role in facilitating intimidation see Hoppen, Elections, Politics, and Society, pp. 11–17; Joseph Lee, The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), pp. 1–4.

The coercion operated in two distinct theatres. On the arterial roads leading into the town, the object was the physical interception of voters and their patrons. On 25 July, as Dadwell Palmer drove towards Sligo, he was set upon by a crowd who insisted that he cry 'Huzza for Somers!'; on his refusing, they beat him severely with sticks and knocked out his driver's teeth with a stone.[9] A week later, on 2 August, Abraham Dobbin was dragged from his gig on the Manorhamilton road and held at pistol-point while six men carried off the workman he was bringing to the poll—a kidnapping whose sole purpose was to subtract a single vote from the count.[10]

Within the town the object shifted from suppression to humiliation and display. Here the weapons were the shattered shopfront and the besieged house, and the currency was public conformity: to be made to cheer for the winning side, or to have one's windows broken for adhering to the losing one. The two theatres were complementary. The roads controlled who reached the hustings; the streets punished those whose allegiances were known. Together they amounted to a sustained effort to determine, by force, the political complexion of the constituency.

V. Economic Warfare and Exclusive Dealing

Beyond the direct assault on voters and notables, the return documents a parallel campaign of economic coercion directed at labourers and merchants who defied the popular will. The weapon was 'exclusive dealing'; the organised withdrawal of custom and labour from the politically non-compliant, enforced, in the Sligo case, through the

[9] Sligo Return, p.1.
[10]Sligo Return, entry for 25 July 1837, p.1.

destruction of property and the administering of compulsory oaths.[11]

The employer James Crawford was a particular target of these agrarian-style sanctions. On 13 and 14 August a crowd drove his mowers from his land and warned them, on pain of 'vengeance,' not to return to his service, going on to visit neighbouring houses and swear their occupants not to work for him; Crawford himself was severely beaten on 15 August. The logic was that of the agrarian boycott transposed into the politics of the hustings: an employer's workforce, like a tenant's holding, was treated as subject to communal sanction.[12]

For the town's merchants the penalties of non-compliance were swift and material. The drays of John Anderson & Co. were intercepted outside the town on 24 July and again on 15 August, their beer-vessels smashed and the contents poured out; carts of salt belonging to Hugh Leighton and others were scattered in the streets on 14 and 19 August; and on 17 August shop-goods belonging to John Buchanan, valued at the considerable sum of £10, were destroyed. By striking at the most basic commodities of trade—beer, salt, and the contents of a shop—the crowd advertised a simple proposition: that economic survival in Sligo was now contingent upon political alignment.[13]

[11]On exclusive dealing as an instrument of political coercion in this period see James S. Donnelly Jr., The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 22–31; Paul Bew, Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978), pp. 14–18.
[12]Sligo Return, entries for 13, 14, and 15 August 1837, p.1.
[13]Sligo Return, entries for 24 July, 14, 15, 17, and 19 August 1837, pp. 1-2.

VI. Sectarian Fractures and the Domestic Sphere

Beneath the politics lay the deeper fault-line of religion, and the return shows how readily electoral rioting passed into sectarian attack. On 29 July the windows of the Strand-hill schoolhouse were broken, and the next morning a riotous assembly gathered to interrupt the Reverend Mr Handcock at divine service; on 15 August the Reverend Mr Bates, a Baptist, and the Reverend Mr Doolittle, a Wesleyan, were each severely beaten in separate incidents. Yet the same record preserves a countervailing detail: Mrs Bates escaped injury only by taking refuge in the house of a Catholic priest—a small but telling instance of cross-communal sanctuary amid the violence.[14]

Most disturbing of all was the violation of the domestic interior. The catalogue of window-breaking reads like a gazetteer of the town's working- and middle-class streets—Pound Street, High Street, Knox Street, Mass Lane, George Street. The attack on Martin Geraghty's house in George Street on 6 August stands for the rest: a mob, in the constabulary's own words, 'broke the upper and lower windows of the house to atoms,' and though the family escaped injury, the bed on which Geraghty's children lay stood directly opposite a broken window, the marks of the stones flung in still visible on the wall above it. The violence respected no threshold; children were bombarded in their own beds, and the passions of the election acknowledged no boundary of age or domestic privacy.[15]

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[14]Sligo Return, entries for 29 July, 30 July, 15 August, and 15 August 1837 respectively, pp.1-2.

[15]Sligo Return, entry for 6 August 1837, p1.

VII. Military Intervention and Partisan Controversy: The Case of Major Browne

The Sligo County election of August 1837 offers a compelling case study in the volatile intersection of local political rivalries, sectarian tension, and the contested role of state security forces in nineteenth-century Ireland. Occurring shortly after a relatively peaceful borough election, the county contest quickly degenerated into an environment of extreme partisan excitement, culminating in a controversial military action that sparked intense public debate and a formal parliamentary inquiry.[16]

The contest was fought among four candidates for two county seats. On 12 August the election commenced at the County Courthouse, where a substantial peacekeeping force of cavalry, infantry, and police—placed under the command of three stipendiary magistrates—was deployed to maintain order. The peace shattered on the morning of 14 August, the first day of actual polling. A large concourse of people had assembled outside the tally-room of Mr. Jones, one of the candidates, when, under the sole direction of Major Browne, a detachment of dragoons executed a sudden and forceful charge into the crowd. The onslaught caught the public entirely by surprise. Eyewitnesses noted that individuals standing directly beside the magistrate had no indication that military force was imminent, preventing the crowd from dispersing safely. The consequences were severe: several individuals suffered serious sabre wounds, others were trampled by military horses, and many more

[16]Sligo Return. The county election ran from 12 to 14 August 1837, the borough election having been conducted in the days immediately preceding without comparable disorder.

sustained grievous injuries in the panicked rush to escape the cavalry.[17]

VIII. The Memorial and Its Allegations

The fallout from the incident was immediate. On 31 October 1837 a formal memorial signed by prominent local electors, inhabitants, and magistrates—including James Crofton, D.D., and magistrates William Kelly, M. D. Manning, and C. J. McDermot—was forwarded to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Constantine Earl Mulgrave. The memorialists argued that no violence or rioting had occurred on the part of the people to justify such a bloody intervention. To contrast Browne's actions, they highlighted the borough election of the preceding days, where special magistrates had successfully maintained order without recourse to military force.[18]

More damningly, the memorial accused Major Browne of explicit partisan bias and voter intimidation. The signatories alleged that Browne had ordered the charge entirely on his own responsibility without consulting the other stipendiary magistrates present; that he had frequently visited the committee rooms of Colonel Perceval, running in direct opposition to Mr. Jones; and that prior to the charge, military dragoons had allegedly been supplied with wine and ardent spirits from the windows of Perceval's committee rooms, suggesting the troops were in an excitable and volatile condition during the assault.[19] The

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[17]Sligo Return, memorial and proceedings, entry for 14 August 1837.

[18]Memorial of James Crofton, D.D., and others, to Constantine Earl Mulgrave, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 31 October 1837, printed in the Sligo Return.

[19]Memorial of 31 October 1837, in Sligo Return. On the deployment of stipendiary magistrates in pre-Famine Ireland see Crossman, Politics, Law and Order, pp. 55–61; Donald Jordan, Land and Popular Politics in Ireland: County Mayo from the Plantation to the Land League (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 88–92.

memorialists concluded that the charge was a deliberate tactic ordered by Browne to intimidate Jones's supporters, influence the outcome of the election, and subvert the free exercise of the franchise, and they warned that the event had severely damaged local confidence in the impartial administration of the law.

IX. The Official Inquiry and Executive Vindication

In response to the outcry, the Dublin Castle administration ordered a public investigation, which was conducted by Colonel Shaw Kennedy between 16 and 20 October 1837. The inquiry utilised detailed topographical evidence, including a map of Old Market Street and a precise log of local distances, to reconstruct the events of 14 August.[20]

On 10 November 1837, the Lord Lieutenant issued his final decision through Under-Secretary Thomas Drummond. The executive completely exonerated Major Browne. Lord Mulgrave asserted that the evidence gathered did not impair Browne's long-standing reputation for strict impartiality, which had been demonstrated across various contested elections. The administration reframed the narrative of the intervention: rather than viewing the dragoon charge as an unprovoked assault on a peaceful assembly, the Lord Lieutenant determined that immediate action had been required to prevent an impending violent collision between two deeply hostile and exasperated political factions.[21]

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[20]On Shaw Kennedy's inquiry see Sligo Return, proceedings of the inquiry held 16–20 October 1837.

[21]Thomas Drummond to the Lord Lieutenant, 10 November 1837, printed in Sligo Return. On the executive's disposition towards order over faction during Drummond's tenure see O'Brien, Thomas Drummond, pp. 178–201.

Drummond's letter concluded with a sharp rebuke of the local magistracy and electors who had signed the petition. The government expressed severe disappointment that several individuals had attached their names to a grave document impugning a public officer's character without even reading the memorial or verifying the truth of its claims. The rebuke was characteristic of the administration's broader disposition: its sympathy lay with a reformed, professionally impartial state apparatus, not with the factional grievances of either landlord or crowd.[22]

Table 1
Perspectives on the Sligo County Election Dispute, 1837

The Memorialists' Grievances	The Government's Findings
The crowd was peaceful; the cavalry charge was unprovoked and sudden.	Immediate military intervention was necessary to prevent violent collision between hostile factions.
Major Browne acted alone and bypassed the other stipendiary magistrates present.	Browne properly exercised the lawful discretion vested in his office.
Troops were compromised by alcohol supplied from Perceval's committee rooms.	Accusations of partisan bias were unsubstantiated by the core evidence of the inquiry.
The intervention was designed to intimidate Jones's voters and alter the election result.	Several signatories had attached their names without reading or verifying the memorial's charges.

[22]Drummond letter of 10 November 1837, in Sligo Return. The rebuke echoes Drummond's broader contempt for what he considered the irresponsible use of the magistracy by the Anglo-Irish landed interest. See also, Memorial from The Magistrates of Sligo, Sligo Magistrates, Return to an Order of the Honourable The House of Commons, dated 23rd. November, 1837.

X. Conclusion: The Costs of the Hustings

The 1837 Sligo election controversy underscores the intense polarisation characterising Irish electoral politics during the Tithe War era and the pre-Famine decades. While local liberals and reformers viewed the state's military apparatus as an oppressive instrument deployed to protect Conservative interests, the centralised administration at Dublin Castle prioritised public order above all else, reinforcing the expansive discretionary powers of its stipendiary magistrates and leaving local critics to lament what they perceived as a compromised democratic process.[23]

When Perceval moved for the outrage return, he meant it to serve a purpose—to expose the lawlessness of the Somers crowd, or to embarrass the executive at Dublin Castle that had, in Tory eyes, failed to restrain it. Detached from that parliamentary quarrel, the document survives as something more valuable: a granular social record of what an Irish election could mean for the community that endured it. For the better part of a month the ordinary government of Sligo gave way to the rule of the cobblestone and the bludgeon. The shattered windows of Dr Henderson's apothecary, the scattered salt of Hugh Leighton, and the stone-marks above the Geraghty children's bed are the residue of a contest in which the vote was wrested from voters, custom withheld from the disloyal, and worship and home alike made targets of political passion.

For the historian of County Sligo this episode belongs within a wider

[23]On the broader political context of the Tithe War and its aftermath see Desmond Bowen, The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800–70 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978), pp. 133–61; Macintyre, The Liberator, pp. 105–25.

pattern of electoral violence that persisted until the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872. The Sligo return of 1837 is a reminder that the electoral rights now taken for granted were, in their early and unreformed days, exercised at genuine hazard—that to enter the polling place could require physical courage, and that to hold the wrong conviction might cost a man his livelihood, his property, or, in the worst of cases, his life. The dual narrative of the return—popular coercion on the streets and contested military intervention in the courthouse yard—captures in miniature the essential drama of Irish pre-Famine politics: the struggle to determine who had the right to coerce, and by what authority that power might be constrained.[24]

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Eviction, Petition, and the Limits of Relief: The Boyle Union Memorial of 1843

I. Introduction

In May 1843, a delegation of tenants lately evicted from the County Roscommon and Sligo estates of Robert Edward King, first Viscount Lorton, presented themselves at the gate of the Boyle workhouse and laid a memorial before the Board of Guardians of the Boyle Poor Law Union, seeking admission to the house.[1] The episode survives because it became, for a moment, a matter of parliamentary interest: a return ordered by the House of Commons on 29 June 1843 preserves the text of the memorial, the Guardians' account of their proceedings, and a sparse statistical record of who was admitted and who was turned away. Slight as it is, the document opens a revealing aperture onto the machinery of dispossession in the Irish countryside in the years immediately before the Great Famine.

This essay reads that return closely, treating it not as a neutral administrative record but as a contested text produced by an unequal encounter between a dispossessed tenantry, a sympathetic parish clergy, and a Poor Law bureaucracy designed to ration relief as narrowly as the law allowed. Three themes emerge from it. First, the memorial exposes the logic of estate "improvement" — the consolidation of small holdings into larger farms — as it was experienced from below, as clearance rather than progress. Second, it shows the Catholic parish priest stepping into

[1] Lord Lorton's Estates, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1843 (443), liii. Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 17 July 1843.

the role of advocate and intermediary, and being firmly rebuffed. Third, and most tellingly, it reveals the deterrent architecture of the New Poor Law in operation: a system that answered mass destitution not with relief but with a test deliberately calibrated to discourage all but the most desperate.

The wider context is the transformation of Irish landed society in the decades after the Union. Population had risen steeply, holdings had been subdivided to the point of bare subsistence upon the potato, and a generation of landlords, many of them heavily encumbered with debt, had come to regard the dense smallholding tenantry on their estates as an obstacle to rational agriculture. The extension of the Poor Law to Ireland in 1838 gave this impulse an institutional partner: by making property liable for the rates of its poorest occupiers, it furnished landlords with a fiscal incentive to clear, while the workhouse stood ready — in theory — to absorb the displaced.[2] Against that background the Boyle memorial is less an isolated grievance than a documentary trace of a process the Famine would shortly accelerate into catastrophe.

II. The Document and Its Context

The return belongs to a familiar genre of Victorian parliamentary paper: a document compelled into existence by a motion in the Commons,

[2] Poor Relief (Ireland) Act 1838 (1 & 2 Vict., c. 56), closely modelled on the English Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 but, unusually, making no statutory provision for out-door relief and confining all relief within the workhouse. The Irish system followed the enquiries of the English commissioner George Nicholls; see George Nicholls, A History of the Irish Poor Law (London, 1856), and, for the modern accounts, Peter Gray, The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–43 (Manchester, 2009), and Helen Burke, The People and the Poor Law in Nineteenth-Century Ireland (Dublin, 1987).

requiring a local body to render an account of itself. That a clearance in north Connaught should have reached the floor of the House at all is itself significant, reflecting the rising political visibility of Irish eviction in the early 1840s, when O'Connell's Repeal agitation was at its height and the condition of the Irish poor was a recurrent subject of Westminster debate. The Boyle Guardians were therefore answering not to their evicted applicants but to Parliament, and the defensive, exculpatory tone of their report must be read in that light.

One detail of that report is especially telling. The Guardians conceded that no minutes of the relevant meeting had been formally kept, and that their account had been reconstructed after the fact from the recollections of the two Guardians still in office, together with those of the clerk and the workhouse master. The admission is a small one, but it speaks volumes about the administrative casualness with which even a mass application could be handled. A petition representing, on its own reckoning, the displacement of families numbering in the hundreds had left no formal trace in the institution's own records; it survived only because Parliament demanded that it be reconstructed.

The memorial itself, addressed "To the Guardians of the Boyle Union" and subscribed on behalf of the memorialists by seven named tenants, sets out the scale of the clearance with the careful particularity of people who knew their own townlands intimately: twenty-four families removed from Leam, twenty from Ardsallagh and Coolnagransheen, smaller numbers from Driminneen, Cultebranagh, and Cultecreaghton, twelve from Curnagree and Curnamealtha, twenty-six from Templevanny in the

parish of Keash, and fifty-five from the parish of Aughrim.[3] Even allowing for the inexact arithmetic typical of such documents, the cumulative figure runs into the low hundreds of families — many hundreds of individuals — and its geographic spread, straddling the Roscommon–Sligo border within the union, points to a clearance conducted not piecemeal but as a coordinated estate policy.

III. Eviction as Estate "Improvement"

The memorial's central grievance is not eviction as such but the rationale offered for it. The tenants understood — or were given to understand — that Lord Lorton intended to consolidate their smallholdings into larger farms, and that the intended beneficiaries were Protestant tenants connected with a body the memorial calls a "Protestant Tenantry Society."[4] Whether that characterisation was strictly accurate is difficult now to establish, and the phrase may owe as much to the memorialists' reading of their predicament as to any formally constituted society of that name. What matters is that it reflects a perception, widely shared among Catholic tenants of the period, that the language of agricultural "improvement" could mask a sectarian redistribution of the land.

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[3] The Boyle Poor Law Union, declared in 1839, drew its electoral divisions from both County Roscommon and County Sligo; several of the townlands named in the memorial, including those in the parishes of Keash and Aughrim, lay within the union's Sligo divisions. See the Boyle union records summarised at workhouses.org.uk.

[4] Robert Edward King, first Viscount Lorton, was a conspicuous anti-Catholic of his generation: elected a representative peer in 1822, he urged Sir Robert Peel to curb "the influence of the priests" and voted against Catholic relief in the House of Lords in May 1825. See History of Parliament Online, sub "King, Hon. Robert (1804–1869), of Rockingham, co. Roscommon." Contemporary report and local tradition put the number cleared from the Lorton estates around Boyle during the 1830s at several hundred persons, many of them assisted to emigrate to North America.

That perception was not baseless. Consolidation — the amalgamation of subdivided holdings into fewer, larger, more "economical" farms — was the orthodox prescription of the agricultural improvers and the political economists who advised government, and it required, almost by definition, the removal of the surplus population it displaced. On the Lorton estates the process was pursued with a thoroughness that made the family's clearances a byword in the district; Lorton himself was a conspicuous opponent of Catholic relief, and the coincidence of his politics with the religious complexion of those he cleared lent the memorialists' suspicion a plausibility that no formal disclaimer could wholly dispel. The Boyle clearance thus belongs to a broad pattern of landlord-driven consolidation across pre-Famine Connaught — a pattern the Famine, after 1845, would transform from a contested estate strategy into a demographic catastrophe.[5]

Against the landlord's assertion of legal right, the memorialists set a counter-claim grounded in custom and morality. They were careful to record that they had committed no offence, and they rested their case on the length of their occupation; "they and their forefathers having lived so long upon the estate", which, in their eyes, gave them a stronger title to the land than any incoming tenant who had never worked it. This appeal to customary attachment against contractual property right recurs throughout Irish agrarian protest, and it reflects the persistence of what might be called a moral economy of land; a conviction that long

[5] On estate consolidation, clearance, and assisted emigration in pre-Famine and Famine Connaught, see James S. Donnelly, Jr., The Great Irish Potato Famine (Stroud, 2001), and Gerard Moran, Sending Out Ireland's Poor: Assisted Emigration to North America in the Nineteenth Century (Dublin, 2004).

occupation conferred entitlements the law did not recognise but that local opinion was prepared to enforce.[6] The collision of these two conceptions of right; customary and moral on the one side, legal and contractual on the other, runs through the whole subsequent history of the Irish land question.

IV. The Role of the Parish Priest

The most arresting figure in the episode is the Rev. Joseph McTucker, parish priest of Boyle, who personally led the evicted families to the workhouse gate and handed the memorial to the clerk. McTucker was at pains to distinguish his action from his official position as Catholic chaplain to the workhouse: he came, he insisted, not as a salaried officer of the institution but as a pastor discharging a duty to his parishioners.[7] The distinction mattered, for it asserted a claim — that the priest's pastoral authority reached into the workhouse yard and entitled him to speak for the poor before the Board — which the Guardians were unwilling to concede.

Concede it they did not. The Board refused, unanimously, to admit McTucker to the boardroom to plead the tenants' case, and in doing so enacted in miniature the deliberate distance the Poor Law administration

[6] The phrase adapts E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Past & Present 50 (1971), 76–136. For its application to Irish agrarian custom and protest, see James S. Donnelly, Jr., Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821–1824 (Cork, 2009).

[7] Lord Lorton's Estates, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1843 (443), liii. Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 17 July 1843, p.2.

sought to keep between itself and clerical or political advocacy.[8] The Act of 1838 had pointedly excluded the clergy of all denominations from ex officio membership of boards of guardians, and the Boyle Guardians' refusal honoured that exclusionary spirit even as the Catholic clergy were becoming, across rural Ireland, ever more central to popular and agrarian politics. The single concession the Board did allow — waiving the warden's ticket of recommendation ordinarily required of applicants — was framed not as a recognition of the memorialists' claims but as a discretionary "indulgence," which the Guardians were careful to record as an exception not to be repeated. Even mercy, in their telling, was a managed departure from a rule of refusal.

V. The Workhouse Test and the Logic of Deterrence

The outcome of the hearing lays bare the deterrent architecture built into the Irish Poor Law. The crowd that gathered at the workhouse was large, and was reported to have threatened to return "fifty thousand" strong; yet of the whole body of memorialists, only three families — Sharkett, Connaghton, and Flanagan — actually presented themselves for the individual examination that admission required. The collapse from collective demonstration to a mere three applications is perhaps the single most eloquent fact in the return.

It admits of more than one reading. The Guardians read it as proof that

[8] The 1838 Act excluded the clergy — Protestant and Catholic alike — from ex officio membership of boards of guardians, a provision criticised in the parliamentary debates on the measure: see Hansard, HC Deb., 30 April 1838. On the increasingly prominent place of the Catholic clergy in local agrarian and political agitation in this period, see Gray, Making of the Irish Poor Law, and Christine Kinealy, This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845–52 (Dublin, 1994).

the crisis had been exaggerated — that the "fifty thousand" were a rhetorical flourish and the number of the genuinely destitute negligible. But the gap between protest and application is better understood as a measure of what the workhouse meant to those it was built to receive. Entry demanded the surrender of the home, the breaking-up of the family into segregated wards, and submission to a regime deliberately made more disagreeable than the lowest independent labour outside it; the principle of "less eligibility" that lay at the heart of the workhouse test.[9] For most of the evicted, to petition collectively was to assert a grievance and a claim to redress; actually to enter the house was a wholly different and far more bitter matter, to be deferred while any alternative, however precarious, remained.

The fate of the three families who did present themselves bears this out. The Sharketts and Connaghtons were nominally admitted but left almost at once; the elder Sharkett reportedly declaring that he had no wish to enter at all and could earn his own bread, while the Flanagans were refused outright on the ground that they still held their house and a stock of potatoes, and so failed the test of absolute destitution. The Guardians noted further, with evident satisfaction, that in the six weeks between the memorial and the date of the return no further applications had come from the named townlands save that of a single infirm man already

[9]The principle of "less eligibility" held that conditions within the workhouse be made worse than those of the lowest-paid independent labourer outside it, so that only the genuinely destitute would seek admission; this is what contemporaries meant by the "workhouse test." See Timothy Besley, Stephen Coate, and Timothy W. Guinnane, "Incentives, Information, and Welfare: England's New Poor Law and the Workhouse Test," and, on the Irish application, Gray, Making of the Irish Poor Law, and Burke, The People and the Poor Law.

resident. They offered this as vindication; it reads as readily as confirmation that the evicted shunned the workhouse to the very limit of endurance, and that relief, exactly as the system was designed to ensure, was sought only as a last and unwelcome resort.

VI. Conclusion

Measured against the scale of the catastrophe that overtook Ireland within two years, the Boyle Union memorial is a slight document. Its value lies precisely in that slightness: in the way a single contested petition compresses into a few pages the forces that were remaking rural Ireland on the eve of the Famine. In it we see landlord consolidation pursued as estate policy and resisted as injustice; the Catholic clergy assuming the part of advocate for a dispossessed people, and being turned from the door; and a Poor Law that met destitution with a means test and a deterrent in place of relief.

Read beside the wider record of clearance on the Lorton estates and across pre-Famine Connaught, the memorial is a documentary fragment of a dislocation already far advanced before the blight arrived. It is a reminder, too, of how thin the institutional safety net of the 1830s and 1840s truly was: a single workhouse, governed by a logic of deterrence, set against a rising tide of eviction it was neither designed nor able to withstand. When subsistence itself failed after 1845, that net would tear almost at once; and the families who had stood at the Boyle workhouse gate in 1843, refusing to enter while they could still earn their bread, would find they had nowhere left to turn.

Agrarian Friction and Localised Lawlessness: A Case Study of County Roscommon in 1845

1.Introduction

The year 1845 stands as a critical threshold in modern Irish history, the outer edge of a pre-Famine social order that the blight of that autumn would shortly destroy. Beneath the visible surface of landlord, agent, and tenant lay a second and largely unwritten system of governance: a dense fabric of communal regulation and popular discipline through which rural communities ordered their own affairs. The Abstracts of the Police Reports of Some of the Principal Outrages, presented to Parliament in 1846, offer an unusually direct view into that subterranean world.[1] By isolating from them the narratives and statistics pertaining to County Roscommon alone, it becomes possible to reconstruct with some precision the anatomy of rural unrest in the county on the very eve of the Great Hunger.

What that anatomy reveals is not chaos. The outrages logged by the Roscommon constabulary describe, on the contrary, a highly targeted and broadly functional framework of alternative justice — one whose purposes were intelligible, consistent, and locally understood.[2] Violence and intimidation in Roscommon were instruments of regulation: they

[1] Abstracts of the Police Reports of Some of the Principal Outrages [committed in Ireland], presented to Parliament, 1846. The abstracts belong to the wider series of "Outrage Papers" compiled from the daily returns made by the Irish Constabulary's county officers to the Constabulary Office in Dublin Castle.

[2] The classic contemporary analysis of this communal regulation is George Cornewall Lewis, On Local Disturbances in Ireland; and on the Causes which have Disturbed the State of Ireland (London, 1836). For the interpretive concept, see E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Past & Present 50 (1971), 76–136.

were used to police the labour market, to enforce communal standards of employment, to obstruct the legal process, and to dictate the terms on which land might be held and worked. To read the abstracts is to watch a parallel jurisdiction at work, one that ran alongside — and frequently against — the courts and the constabulary of the Crown.

This essay treats the Roscommon outrages of 1845 not as a catalogue of crime but as evidence of a system. It examines four overlapping fields in which that system operated — the regulation of labour, the control of land and tenure, the obstruction of legal process, and the older domain of faction and kinship — and argues that each represented a coherent communal response to economic insecurity in the last months before the Famine remade the social landscape entirely.

I1. The Regulation of Labour and the Rejection of External Intruders

A primary source of friction in 1845 Roscommon was the close regulation of the labour market by secret societies and kinship networks. In an economy in which access to employment was, quite literally, a matter of subsistence, the arrival of outside labourers; habitually described in the reports as "strangers", or the acceptance of wages below the local rate was understood as a direct assault upon the community's means of survival.[3]

[3] On the regulation of wages, employment, and conacre by Whiteboy combinations, see Michael Beames, Peasants and Power: The Whiteboy Movements and their Control in Pre-Famine Ireland (Brighton, 1983), and the essays collected in Samuel Clark and James S. Donnelly, Jr. (eds), Irish Peasants: Violence and Political Unrest, 1780–1914 (Manchester, 1983).

The reports record numerous occasions on which armed parties acted against those who disturbed these local employment dynamics. The friction was sharpest around the large infrastructural projects of the period — road-building and arterial drainage works — which drew labourers from beyond the parish into Roscommon. Local factions answered with night raids on the houses of farmers and overseers who had hired or harboured such men. The procedure was remarkably uniform: an entry forced about midnight, firearms displayed, and the immediate dismissal of the "strangers" demanded. Victims were commonly made to kneel and to swear, under penalty of death — or of being carried off on "bearers," the stretchers on which the dead were borne — never again to employ labour from outside the parish.

337 occurrences are listed in the Roscommon Police Reports, which cover 30 pages; too many to show here. Some examples from the Barony of Boyle follow:

Table 1
Examples from the Barony of Boyle 1845

Date	Place	Injured Party	Particulars	Offence
March24	Barony of Ballymoe. Townland: Newtown	Owen Farmer	About 9 P.M., two armed men came to Farmer's house and demanded arms. On being told by him that he had none, they swore him as to the truth of his assertion.	Demand of Arms
March 24	Barony of Boyle Townland: Knockroe	George Cox and Thomas Cox	About 11, P.M., a party of men called at the house of Geo. Cox, and demanded his gun, and that it would he returned in a short time, which he gave them. The same party, it is supposed, went immediately after to Thos. Cox's house, (father of the above) and demanded his arms, which he refused, and threatened to fire on them if they did not decamp, which they accordingly did.	Robbery of arms Demand of arms
March 26	Barony of Boyle Townland: Ardcarn	Thos. Mullany	On this evening & party of men unknown, apparently strangers and undisguised, entered the dwelling of Mullany, and took therefrom a gun.	Robbery of arms

This protective violence extended beyond labourers to the managerial

figures who stood between landlord and workforce.[4] Stewards, herds, and bailiffs who showed what the reports call "double diligence," enforcing a strict labour discipline on their employers' behalf, were marked men: a steward who discharged local workmen might expect to be waylaid on the public road or fired at through his kitchen window. The communal message was unambiguous. Employment was treated not as the private gift of the employer but as a common resource, and its distribution was subject to a local veto enforced, where necessary, by the gun.

II1. Land Occupancy, Evictions, and the Enforcement of the "Rockite" Code

If labour was one axis of communal regulation, land was the other and the more fundamental. The relationship between landlord, tenant, and soil was the master fault-line of Roscommon society, and the abstracts show that any disturbance of the customary tenure of a holding — an eviction, a surrender, the consolidation of several small farms into one — drew an immediate and almost ritual retaliation.[5]

When a tenant was put out, the vacated holding was placed, in effect, under a communal interdict: whoever was rash enough to take the lease, or to act as caretaker for the landlord, was branded an intruder and treated as one. The "house attack" by which such a person was warned

[4] Abstracts of the Police Reports of Some of the Principal Outrages [committed in Ireland], presented to Parliament, 1846. The abstracts belong to the wider series of "Outrage Papers" compiled from the daily returns made by the Irish Constabulary's county officers to the Constabulary Office in Dublin Castle, p. 116.

[5] The "Rockite" label derives from the agrarian rebellion of the 1820s waged in the name of the mythical "Captain Rock"; on its code, its threatening notices, and its preoccupation with land and tenure, see James S. Donnelly, Jr., Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821–1824 (Cork, 2009).

off followed a recognisable choreography. Armed men, their faces blackened or otherwise disguised against identification, descended on the new occupant's cabin by night; the occupant was dragged from bed or forced to kneel at the hearth and there sworn to quit the holding within a set term — commonly a week, or by the November gale day; and the visit was punctuated, for emphasis, by the breaking of window-sashes, the smashing of the delf upon the dresser, and, in the gravest cases, the levelling of the house itself.

Where intimidation failed, arson supplied a final economic corrective. The firing of thatched roofs, of out-offices, and of stored produce; oat-stacks and potato-clamps above all, served a double end: it punished the recalcitrant occupier and, by destroying the holding's standing value, rendered it unprofitable to the landlord who had let it. Destruction, in this calculus, was not nihilism but enforcement.

IV. Resistance to Legal Process and Alternative Systems of Justice

The authority of the Crown; exercised through the quarter sessions, the petty sessions, and the still-new apparatus of the Irish Constabulary, was contested across Roscommon throughout 1845. The abstracts disclose a sustained and organised effort to frustrate the execution of both civil and criminal law.[6]

Process-servers were among the most exposed figures in the rural

[6] On the routine obstruction of process-servers, the destruction of legal documents, and the consequent unenforceability of the law in disturbed districts, see Beames, Peasants and Power, and Lewis, On Local Disturbances.

hierarchy. The reports repeatedly describe armed parties ambushing them on the road, or breaking into their houses, for the specific purpose of seizing and destroying the civil-bill processes, decrees, and tithe notices they carried. To abstract these documents by force was to halt an eviction or a debt-recovery before it could be perfected in court: the paper, not merely the man, was the target.

Beyond the obstruction of process, the community enforced a rigorous and often terrifying silence about all dealings with the state. Witness intimidation was not incidental but structural, and the constabulary's own summaries show it operating against three distinct classes of person.

Table 2
Witness intimidation

Target of intimidation	**Typical aggression documented**	**Assigned motive**
Crown witnesses	Midnight house-firings, posting of Rockite notices, physical assaults.	To prevent testimony at the coming assizes.
Prosecuting farmers	Maiming of livestock (cutting tails and sinews), destruction of turf-clamps.	Retaliation for prosecuting local sheep- or crop-thieves.
Cooperating inmates	Threatening notices left on family dwellings.	To deter the sharing of information with the authorities.

The cumulative effect was to make identification and prosecution very nearly impossible. Even where a victim recognised his assailants, the recurring constabulary formula records that the injured party "declined

proceeding" or "refused to identify" — preferring the calculable mercy of the local faction to the uncertain and distant protection of the Crown. The choice was rational: the court sat occasionally and far away, while the neighbours were near at hand every night.

V. Faction Fighting and Kinship Feuds

Not all of the recorded outrages can be assimilated to this socio-economic logic. A substantial undercurrent of the Roscommon reports concerns violence that was interpersonal, factional, and domestic in origin — a reminder that rural society was governed as much by inherited loyalties and local rivalries as by any calculus of land and labour. Faction fights — pitched encounters between rival confederations such as the Caravats and the Shanavests, or their local offshoots like the "Ryan Slaters" and the "Goold faction" — erupted characteristically at the great public gatherings of the rural calendar: fairs, patterns, and funerals.[7] They were extraordinarily violent. Combatants waylaid one another on the public roads and fought with sticks, stones, and the loaded cane-swords of the district, and the reports duly record their harvest of broken heads and fractured skulls.

Alongside these set-piece affrays, the constabulary noted a steady traffic of outrage arising from the intimate disputes of family and marriage. Armed parties broke into houses to compel a farmer to pay an overdue marriage portion to a sister-in-law, or to frighten a young man into

[7] The names are those of the great Munster confederations of the early nineteenth century; the reports' "Corovats" are the Caravats. See Paul E. W. Roberts, "Caravats and Shanavests: Whiteboyism and Faction Fighting in East Munster, 1802–11," in Clark and Donnelly (eds), Irish Peasants, 64–101.

honouring a promise of marriage. More startling are the repeated instances of forcible abduction, in which young women — particularly those with independent fortunes or a prospect of inheriting land — were carried off at night by armed and disguised men seeking to force a marriage and, with it, a transfer of property.[8] Quarrels over inheritance and boundary were no less liable to violence: a disputed right-of-way through a potato field, or a disagreement over the division of a family plot, could escalate into serious assault among close kin, the parties bypassing legal mediation entirely in favour of direct settlement.

V1. Conclusion

The Roscommon abstracts of 1845 depict a society living under two systems of authority at once. Above stood the formal apparatus of the British state and the landlord interest, with its sessions, decrees, and constabulary; beneath and against it ran a highly organised and deeply reactive system of popular justice, enforced by the night-rider, the threatening notice, and the solidarity of the townland.

Every broken window, houghed beast, and midnight shot entered in the constabulary's ledger was a calculated move in a local contest for economic security. In the last months before the Famine overturned the demographic and social order of the Irish countryside, the outrages of Roscommon show a community deploying informal violence with discipline and purpose — to defend its labour, its land, and the

[8]Forcible abduction for marriage, frequently with an eye to a woman's fortune or her prospect of inheriting land, was a recognised category of pre-Famine rural crime; see the discussion in Clark and Donnelly (eds), Irish Peasants.

customary way of life that the coming catastrophe would sweep away.

‘Without a Single Circumstance of Dignity’: The Murder of William Sydney Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, 2 April 1878

I. Introduction: A Death Long Expected

In the spring of 1878, William Sydney Clements, the 3rd Earl of Leitrim, was seventy-two years old, still physically powerful, and still the most feared and hated landlord in Ireland. He had survived at least one attempt on his life in Mohill in 1860, further plots through the 1860s and early 1870s, and the accumulating evidence of an entire county’s detestation. A contemporary observer who knew his estates wrote afterwards that when the news of his death came in April 1878, it ‘brought that surprise which is always occasioned when a thing long expected happens at the very last.’ He had eighty processes of ejectment pending against his tenants in Donegal when he was killed. The week before his death he was in Dublin ordering seeds for the estate; when told the order would take a week to complete, he replied, with what proved to be unwitting prophecy: ‘A week! Where may I be within a week?’[1]

The murder of Lord Leitrim on the Milford road near Cratlagh Wood in County Donegal on the morning of 2 April 1878 was not an isolated act of criminal violence. It was the endpoint of a twenty-four-year accumulation of agrarian grievance, personal antagonism, and communal rage that the 3rd Earl’s management of his estates had generated across

[1]Highways and Byways, extracted at irishhistory.com: “The week before his assassination, he was in Dublin ordering seeds for the estate. On being told it would take a week for the order to be completed, he replied, somewhat prophetically, ‘A week! Where may I be within a week?’”

Counties Leitrim and Donegal. It was also, in its timing and its consequences, a signal event in the pre-history of the Land League—a demonstration, eighteen months before the founding of the Mayo League at Castlebar, of the lengths to which the Irish tenantry could be driven by a landlord of exceptional harshness. This essay examines the character and conduct of the 3rd Earl, the circumstances of his death, the investigation that followed, and the profoundly ambivalent public response to his killing, concluding with an assessment of the murder's place within the broader context of the Irish agrarian crisis of the late 1870s.

II. William Sydney Clements: The Making of the 'Wicked Earl'

William Sydney Clements was born in Dublin on 15 October 1806, the second son of the 2nd Earl of Leitrim. He was educated at Sandhurst and followed the conventional career of a younger son of the Anglo-Irish gentry—military service, promotion to captain, a period of service in Portugal, and an aide-de-camp appointment to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1831. In 1839, on the death of his elder brother, he became Viscount Clements and member of Parliament for County Leitrim, a seat he held until 1847. He did not succeed to the earldom itself until December 1854, on the death of his father, when he retired from the army at the rank of lieutenant-colonel and turned his full attention to the management of an estate that spanned four counties.[2]

[2]William Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Clements,_3rd_Earl_of_Leitrim). Clements was born in Dublin on 15 October 1806, the second son of the 2nd Earl of Leitrim. He was educated at Sandhurst and commissioned as an ensign in the 43rd Foot in 1824, promoted captain in 1831 after service in Portugal 1826–1827, and eventually retired as a lieutenant-colonel on his succession to the earldom in 1855.

The Clements family had accumulated lands in County Leitrim, Donegal, Kildare, and Galway over generations. The principal seat was Lough Rynn, near Mohill in County Leitrim, a handsome house on the shores of Lough Rynn whose management under previous earls had been, if not generous, at least not exceptional in its severity. The 2nd Earl, Charles Clements, had been regarded by tenants in Donegal with something approaching favour; the McFadden family and others on the Fanad Peninsula credited their survival of the Great Famine in part to his relative benevolence. The accession of William Sydney in 1854 transformed the character of the estate's management overnight. What had been a conventional Anglo-Irish landlordism, harsh in its structural logic but not without its customary accommodations, became under the 3rd Earl something far more personal, more systematic, and more pitilessly total.[3]

The 3rd Earl was obsessed with what he conceived as agricultural improvement and the rational organisation of his estates. His biographer, Fiona Slevin, and the revisionist account by A. P. W. Malcomson both acknowledge that his intentions—whatever their effects—included a genuine if authoritarian commitment to productivity. He planted grasses on the Donegal coast to control sand drift, introduced improved livestock breeds from Scotland, drained bogs, and invested heavily in estate infrastructure. But these improvements were pursued by methods that combined imperious self-will with utter indifference to the human

[3]Leitrim Observer, 'The Assassination of Lord Leitrim, Part 1' (leitrimobserver.ie, June 2020). The 2nd Earl, Charles Clements, who preceded William Sydney, had been regarded by tenants as relatively benevolent, and the McFadden family on the Fanad Peninsula survived the Great Famine thanks to his beneficence.

cost: tenants who failed to meet his standards, who cut a tree without permission, improved a property without leave, failed to pay rent on time, or merely displeased him in some minor particular, faced eviction on terms that left no room for appeal or negotiation. One contemporary observed that he 'imported bulls and rams of choice breeds from Scotland, but simultaneously, to enforce the improvement, made away with all the existing sires—naturally he compensated their owners, but no one likes to be done good to by compulsion.'[4]

His correspondence with his barrister, George B. West, preserved at the National Library of Ireland, reveals a man whose approach to estate management from the very earliest years of his landlordship was relentlessly legalistic and punitive. He personally conducted many of the eviction cases against his tenants, attending the petty sessions courts and driving the legal process with a directness that dispensed with the intermediary of a land agent. He evicted a blacksmith for allowing tenants to warm themselves by his fire while waiting to pay their rent. He razed a schoolhouse that had become the subject of a dispute with a parish priest and had the materials carted to Lough Rynn. He moved livestock between farms without the owners' consent, destroyed unauthorised buildings, and evicted entire townlands when he judged the land overpopulated—expressing a preference, as contemporaries noted, for

[4]A. P. W. Malcomson, Virtues of a Wicked Earl: The Life and World of William Sydney Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim (1806–78) (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), reviewed in Patrick Maume, 'A Glimpse of the Wicked Earl,' Pue's Occurrences (puesoccurrences.wordpress.com, 16 February 2010): "His management of his Leitrim and Donegal estates was authoritarian; he was disliked even by police and Dublin Castle officials, with whom he constantly quarrelled; relatives called him insane."

'fleecy animals' over human beings.[5]

Layered over this record of agrarian tyranny was the darkest element of Lord Leitrim's reputation: the persistent allegation that he coerced female tenants or their daughters sexually, threatening eviction to extract compliance. The charge was repeated in the House of Commons, where some of his peers called him 'the bad earl,' and survives in the popular folklore of County Donegal, where oral tradition, folk songs, and communal memory have preserved specific named cases of violation. Slevin's authoritative biography treats the allegations with appropriate nuance, noting that a journalist who investigated the assassination in 1878 could find no one in the locality who regarded the charge as tenable, and that there is no direct archival evidence to confirm it.[6] What is not in doubt is that the folk memory of Fanad and of Leitrim accepted the charge as fact, and that it constituted a central element in the communal justification; felt rather than argued, for what was to come.

III. The Road to Cratlagh Wood: Escalation, 1860–1878

The assassination did not arrive without warning. As early as September 1860, James Murphy shot at Lord Leitrim as he walked down the main street of Mohill and missed. Clements described the episode in a letter to

[5]Brian Thomas, 'Extracts from the Letters of the 3rd Earl of Leitrim,' History Hub (historyhub.ie, 2023). The letters, held at the National Library of Ireland, cover the period 1838–1861 and reveal Clements's increasingly legalistic and punitive approach to estate management from the very earliest years of his landlordship.

[6]William Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, Wikipedia. "Some of his peers repeated accusations of his 'immorality towards daughters of tenants' in the House of Commons and named him 'the bad earl.'" Slevin quotes a journalist who investigated the assassination as claiming: "even among those who hold the strongest views upon Lord Leitrim's conduct as a landlord, the charge [of debauchery] is discredited and I did not meet a single person who regarded it as tenable."

West as 'my recent escape from assassination and being made the victim of political conspiracy,' attributing it; in the conspiratorial mode that increasingly characterised his political thinking, to the Liberal administration of the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Carlisle. Further plots surfaced through the 1860s, and the Lord Lieutenant eventually removed Clements from his appointments as a justice of the peace for Counties Leitrim, Donegal, and Galway: a public act of censure that reflected Dublin Castle's exasperation with a landlord whose behaviour was generating disorder across three counties.[7]

In the years after 1865, when he built his Donegal residence, Manorvaughn, on the shores of Mulroy Bay, Lord Leitrim increasingly concentrated his personal attention on his Donegal estates; a shift that intensified the conflict between landlord and tenant on the Fanad Peninsula to the point of open confrontation. The evictions became more wholesale, more rapid, and more deliberately punitive. In March 1876, a series of clearances during a period of bitter cold drew national press attention: a Presbyterian widow named Algoe was evicted with her six young children, along with three other cottier families, apparently for the offence of cutting trees. Three days later, six more were evicted for gathering seaweed or cutting turf. The newspaper report that 'old and infirm persons, women and children, were put out in the snow on the mountain side, absolutely without shelter' gave the evictions a public

[7]Slevin, By Hereditary Virtues, as summarised in William Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, Wikipedia: "the final straw that motivated the individuals involved in Lord Leitrim's assassination was his alleged rape of the daughter of one of his assassins." On the 1860 Mohill shooting see History Hub, 'Extracts from the Letters of the 3rd Earl of Leitrim': Clements described the event as 'my recent escape from assassination and being made the victim of political conspiracy.'

profile that accelerated the political radicalisation of the Donegal tenantry. By early 1878, reports in the Freeman's Journal indicated that eighty further evictions were planned in the Fanad area. [8]

The three men who would carry out the assassination were products of this specific local climate of dispossession. Michael McElwee of Ballyworiskey, Neil Shiels of Doughmore, and Michael Heraghty of Tullyconnell were all from the remote Fanad Peninsula. Their motive was not political abstraction but direct personal injury: McElwee's father had been involved in litigation with Lord Leitrim in 1877, the outcome of which had rendered McElwee himself bankrupt and seen his house and farm sold at auction. In Slevin's account, a further private grievance may have been the immediate trigger: the alleged rape of the daughter of one of the conspirators, a charge that, true or not, was accepted as fact by those who planned and executed the killing. By the late winter of 1878, the three men had resolved on action. Crossing Mulroy Bay by boat from Fanad to Mevagh Parish, they took up a position in ambush along the road between Lord Leitrim's house at Manorvaughn and the village of Milford.[9]

IV. Cratlagh Wood, 2 April 1878: The Ambush

On the morning of Tuesday, 2 April 1878, Lord Leitrim set out from

[8]Leitrim Observer, 'The Assassination of Lord Leitrim, Part 1'. "In March 1876, there was outrage over a series of evictions during a particularly cold spell. A Presbyterian widow named Algoe was evicted with her six young children, together with three cottier families, apparently because they had cut some trees." Dwellings were levelled 'by up to twenty bailiffs protected by twenty armed police.'

[9]Leitrim Observer, 'The Assassination of Lord Leitrim, Part 1.' William Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, Wikipedia: "In 1877, McElwee's father was involved in litigation with Leitrim with the result that McElwee was rendered bankrupt, and his house and farm were sold at auction."

Manorvaughn in two hired carriages, intending to arrive at Milford, a village he owned in its entirety, by nine o'clock. The first carriage was the Milford Hotel coach, carrying Lord Leitrim himself, his court clerk John Makim, and the young coachman Charles Buchanan. The second carriage, following behind, carried Lord Leitrim's coachman and valet William Kincaid and the owner-driver Michael Logue. Contemporary accounts record that Logue, shortly after joining the Milford road, stopped his car and inspected his horse for lameness, a pause that some believed was deliberate; arranged to separate the two carriages and isolate the first from any assistance. The first carriage continued on ahead, carrying Lord Leitrim, Makim, and Buchanan along the road that skirted the eastern edge of Cratlagh Wood where it divided from the shores of Mulroy Bay.

The attack came without warning. The first shot hit Lord Leitrim in the right arm, fracturing the elbow joint; a further nine or ten bullets struck him in the back of the left shoulder. Charles Buchanan, the coachman, was shot in the head and died at once, falling to the road with his horse rug still about his knees. John Makim, the clerk; a young man of twenty-five who had been in Leitrim's service only a short time, was also shot in the head and stumbled from the carriage. The horses bolted and the carriages separated. What followed was unusually brutal even by the standards of Irish agrarian violence. Lord Leitrim, despite his wounds and despite his age of seventy-two, managed to fall to the ground and then struggle to his feet. Two of the assassins, McElwee and Shiels, came forward to finish the killing and a fierce physical struggle ensued. Leitrim was physically strong enough to grapple with both, but he was outnumbered and already badly wounded. He was beaten to death with

the butt of a gun.[10]

When Kincaid and Logue in the second carriage came over the brow of the hill and saw the scene below them, they encountered Makim staggering towards them saying he was shot; then the horse shied at a dark mass in the road—the body of Buchanan—and refused to pass. Then they found Lord Leitrim himself, lying in a pool of water on the road, his head beaten in. Looking across to the water of Mulroy Bay below, they could see a boat pulling away with two men at the oars, disappearing behind one of the bay's innumerable small islands. A police patrol of two constables had been stationed on the road within half a mile, but they encountered only the frightened horse galloping riderless towards Milford. The plan had been, as the same contemporary observer noted, 'boldly and cunningly laid; yet its success is surprising' given the patrol's proximity.[11]

John Makim died later that day from the combination of his gunshot wound and the shock of the assault; the post-mortem identified suffusion of blood on the brain as the cause of death, the wound itself—a scar from a slug above the ear—being less immediately fatal than the violence of the attack. Charles Buchanan had died instantly. Lord Leitrim had no

[10]The Troubles of Ireland blog (thetroublesofireland.blogspot.com), 'William Sydney Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim' (July 2016). "One of the first shots hit him in the right arm, fracturing his elbow joint and he took nine or ten bullets in the back of his left shoulder. He fell to the ground and the horses galloped away. Two of the assassins, McElwee and Shiels went to finish him but he managed to get to his feet and struggle fiercely with the two. Even at 72 and suffering gunshot wounds, Lord Leitrim was strong enough to wrestle with his attackers."

[11]Highways and Byways, extracted at irishhistory.com: "First they met the clerk running towards them, and saying he was shot; then the horse shied at a black mass in the road, and refused to pass it; it was the driver of the front car. Then they came to Lord Leitrim, lying in a pool of water, with his brains beaten out."

fatal shot-wound; the gun butts had done the final work. Three men entered the ambush site; three men were killed.

V. The Inquest, the Investigation, and the Silence of Fanad

The bodies of Lord Leitrim and John Makim were taken to Milford for the inquest, laid out in a narrow chamber on plain deal tables. The contrast between the two was observed and recorded by those present. Makim was surrounded by friends expressing their grief openly, 'singing praises and prayers,' while his employer, for all his wealth and rank, lay alone, as one account put it, 'without a single circumstance of dignity.' The coroner's inquiry was held the following afternoon in Milford courthouse, before a packed room that included senior police officers, local magistrates, and the solicitor representing the next of kin of the dead coachman Charles Buchanan.[12]

The investigation that followed moved with considerable energy but very limited result. Michael Heraghty was arrested: a broken gunstock had been traced to him, and paper used as wadding in the rifle was traced to a school copybook belonging to the McGranahan family. The McGranahans were held in Lifford Jail but released for lack of evidence. Heraghty appeared at Lifford Assizes on 19 July 1878; described as being about twenty years old, small and wiry, with black hair and light grey eyes, he was 'sallow and ill-looking' on the day of his trial. He died in Lifford Jail of typhus three months later, without having been convicted.

[12]Lough Rynn website, 'Assassination of Lord Leitrim.' "The bodies were laid out in a narrow chamber with bare whitewashed walls on plain deal tables. The contrast between the two men in death was marked. Makim was surrounded by friends 'expressing their wild grief and singing praises and prayers', while his 'unhappy master', for all his wealth and status, lay alone, 'without a single circumstance of dignity.'"

Neither Neil Shiels nor Michael McElwee was ever arrested. Shiels returned to his tailor's shop after the murder; McElwee resumed making lobster pots and continued his career as a travelling tailor until his death in 1921, never having been charged.[13]

The silence of the Fanad community, absolute, sustained, and apparently complete, was the decisive factor in the investigation's failure. Rewards were offered on a substantial scale: Lord Leitrim's heir Robert Clements reportedly offered £10,000; a group of thirty magistrates raised a further £6,000; the government added £500, with a six-month time limit that suggested something less than a whole-hearted commitment to the exercise. All went unclaimed. There was, as it later emerged, information available. In the 1960s, documents came to light showing that the Lord Lieutenant's agent had in fact obtained information identifying the killers, purchased for the sum of seventeen shillings. The information had been quietly filed at Dublin Castle and left to gather dust. No one had wished to pursue it.[14]

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[13]Lough Rynn website, 'Assassination of Lord Leitrim.' "The gun butt had been traced to Heraghty, and paper for the wadding used to load the rifle was traced to a school copybook owned by the McGranahans. The McGranahans were released from Lifford Jail due to a lack of evidence. Heraghty died in Lifford Jail of typhus." Heraghty appeared at Lifford Assizes on 19 July 1878, described as about twenty years of age, small and wiry, with black hair and light grey eyes. He died in gaol three months later without conviction.

[14]Leitrim Observer, 'History: Lord Leitrim's Killers Lauded as Heroes' (June 2020). "Various rewards were offered for the identification of Lord Leitrim's killers. The heir to the earldom, Robert Clements, was reported as offering £10,000. A group of thirty magistrates raised £6,000. The government offered a £500 reward, though required information to be submitted within six months – not a great indication of any enthusiasm to apprehend the assassins." In the 1960s it emerged that information had been gained by the Lord Lieutenant's agent for 17 shillings, but had been filed away in Dublin Castle and ignored.

VI. The Public Response: Dublin, Donegal, and the Divided Memory of Lord Leitrim

The reaction to Lord Leitrim's death was one of the most extraordinary public spectacles of the pre-Land League period in Ireland. Robert Clements, his nephew and heir, was in Paris with his wife when he received news of the murder and immediately set out for Donegal. On 8 April the body was released and Robert accompanied it on the long journey south, via Letterkenny and Strabane by road, and then by rail to Dublin. By the time the funeral cortège reached the city, word of the earl's death had spread through the population, and what greeted the coffin was not mourning but something close to celebration.

The Times reported the scenes along the Liffey in detail.[15] The chief mourners and gentry were 'charged and literally hurled back' from the vicinity of the hearse. A large mob surrounded the vehicle, 'shouting, cheered, hissed, and threatened,' and made repeated attempts to open the door of the hearse and access the remains. An attempt was made to overturn the vehicle altogether and cast the coffin into the river. This continued for twenty minutes before twenty-five policemen arrived and, with difficulty, imposed a measure of order; even then, the police and mob clashed repeatedly before the coffin could be moved. Robert Clements, astounded by the scale and fury of the reception, feared the crowd sufficiently to insist on being the only person to accompany the

[15]Lough Rynn website, 'Assassination of Lord Leitrim.' "By the time the mourners reached the city, word had spread of the earl's death, and groups of hecklers hurled abuse at the coffin as it passed along the Liffey. The Times reported the disorderly scene as the chief mourners and gentry 'were charged and literally hurled back from its vicinity'. The hearse was surrounded by a large mob who 'shouted, cheered, hissed, and threatened' and 'made to open the door of the hearse, and get at the remains'. This went on for twenty minutes."

body as it was finally interred in the Clements family vault at St Michan's Church, Church Street.

Inside the church, the Dean noted for the congregation that Lord Leitrim's 'purse was ever open' for St Michan's: the earl had recently made a large donation towards the renovation of Handel's organ and contributed £100 to the curate endowment fund. It was a detail that captured, in miniature, the contradiction at the heart of the 3rd Earl's life and reputation: the man who would not give a clergyman a blanket to cover the bones of a starving evicted family had been a generous patron of his Dublin church. The contradiction was not lost on those who lined the Liffey to hiss the hearse.

In County Leitrim itself, opinion was more formally divided. The Orange Lodge in Mohill declared in a formal resolution that its members 'sing the praises of Lord Leitrim, and proclaim to the world that he was a chaste God-fearing man and a kind indulgent landlord.' Two of the earl's principal tenants led a large meeting in Mohill where seventy farmers signed a letter of condolence. A letter in the Irish Times from 'A Tenant-Farmer' noted that the average wage bill for the Lough Rynn estate was £80 per week, and that many a poor tenant had earned not only his rent during the winter months but also what kept his family in relative comfort from work on the estate.[16] These were not simply hypocritical testimonials to a feared superior: the 3rd Earl had, in fact, maintained a

[16]Leitrim Observer, 'History: Lord Leitrim's Killers Lauded as Heroes.' The Orange Lodge in Mohill declared that Lord Leitrim 'was a chaste God-fearing man and a kind indulgent landlord.' Two of the earl's principal tenants led a meeting in Mohill where seventy farmers signed a letter of condolence. A letter in the Irish Times from 'A Tenant-Farmer' noted that the average wage bill for Lough Rynn was £80 per week.

regime of paternalistic employment at Lough Rynn that provided real economic benefit to many of his Leitrim tenants, and his harshness was not evenly distributed across his four-county estate.

In Donegal, where he had been most present and most brutal in the last decade of his life, the response was of a different order entirely. There was, as contemporaries noted, no visible mourning on the Fanad Peninsula. The killers were not denounced or reported; they were protected by the collective silence of an entire community, and within a generation; within a few years, in fact, they were celebrated. The successor to the earldom, Robert Clements, who rode about the country unescorted in the weeks after the murder and immediately set about reinstating the victims of his predecessor's most arbitrary evictions, was respected rather than feared. The contrast in popular memory between the two men was total, and it was the 3rd Earl's memory that served as the archetype of landlord tyranny in the folklore of Connaught and Donegal for generations.[17]

VII. The 'Fanad Patriots' and the Memory of the Murder

In 1960, a Celtic Cross was erected at Kindrum in County Donegal to the memory of the three men who had waited in ambush at Cratlagh Wood eighty-two years before. Its inscription leaves no room for ambiguity about how they were regarded in the community they came from:

[17]Highways and Byways, extracted at irishhistory.com: "The Leitrim name has a very different repute in the county nowadays. The old Earl's nephew and successor … came down at once to the scene of the murder, and while making himself conspicuous by his attempts to bring the criminals to justice, rode about the country unattended. The tenants, however, soon found that there was to be a new order. All the victims of arbitrary ejectment, so far as was possible, were reinstated."

'Erected to the memory of the three Fanad patriots, Neil Shiels Doughmore, Michael Herachty Tullyconnell, Michael McElwee Ballywhorisky, who by their heroism in Cratlagh Wood on the morning of 2nd April, 1878 ended the tyranny of landlordism.' Neil Shiels's descendants have continued to hold a commemorative event at the monument on or near the anniversary date each year. McElwee, who carried the secret of the killing with him until his death in 1921, has been recalled in family memory in terms that make no distinction between the killing and the resistance it represented.[18]

The historical assessment of the murder has been complicated by the revisionist scholarship of A. P. W. Malcomson, whose biography Virtues of a Wicked Earl (2009) sought to complicate the one-dimensional portrait of Lord Leitrim as agrarian monster, emphasising his genuine if coercive commitment to agricultural improvement and challenging some of the more lurid elements of his popular reputation. Malcomson's argument has not displaced but has usefully complicated the received picture, and Slevin's work represents a more nuanced account of the 3rd Earl than popular folklore had previously offered. What neither revisionism nor nuance can dissolve is the structural reality: a landlord who had eighty eviction processes pending at the time of his death, who had been removed from the magistracy by the Lord Lieutenant, who was feared across three counties, and whose clerk and coachman were killed alongside him in an ambush that the community that conducted it

[18]History Hub, 'Extracts from the Letters of the 3rd Earl of Leitrim.' The memorial at Kindrum reads: 'Erected to the memory of the three Fanad patriots, Neil Shiels Doughmore, Michael Herachty Tullyconnell, Michael McElwee Ballywhorisky, who by their heroism in Cratlagh Wood on the morning of 2nd April, 1878 ended the tyranny of landlordism.'

regarded as entirely justified.

VIII. Historical Significance: Prelude to the Land War

The murder of Lord Leitrim on 2 April 1878 was the most dramatic single act of agrarian violence in pre-Land League Ireland. It preceded the founding of the Land League of Mayo by less than seventeen months, and its significance as a prelude to that larger movement has been widely acknowledged. Michael Davitt, when he returned to Ireland in 1879 and began to organise the Irishtown meeting and the subsequent Mayo League, was operating in a political and psychological landscape that the Cratlagh Wood ambush had already shaped. The murder demonstrated, with a force that no meeting or pamphlet could equal, that the Irish tenantry had reached a point of desperation at which the most extreme consequences of landlordism could provoke the most extreme response. It dramatised, before the Land League had been conceived, the proposition that the system of landlordism; not merely this or that landlord, was itself the problem.[19]

More immediately, the murder and its aftermath illustrated two features of rural Ireland's political culture that the Land League would itself rely upon: the capacity of a rural community to maintain absolute silence in the face of official investigation when the official interest conflicted with the communal one, and the existence of a popular moral code that placed

[19]Leitrim Observer, 'History: The Land Act and Killing of Lord Leitrim' (June 2020): "The assassination was seen as a landmark in the fight for tenants' rights and is widely believed to have given impetus to the Land League which was founded by Michael Davitt the following year." Paul Bew, Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978), p. 46, discusses the pre-Land League climate of agrarian resistance in which Lord Leitrim's murder played a galvanising symbolic role.

the justification of tenant violence against oppressive landlordism above the formal law of the state. The seventeen shillings paid to the Lord Lieutenant's agent for information that was then filed and forgotten speaks to the ambivalence of the state apparatus itself: an ambivalence that would become, in the Land War of 1879–1882, a structural feature of the contest between the Dublin Castle administration and the League.

The connection to the territory examined in this volume is oblique but real. The Kilronan evictions of the 1880s; documented in the Rededication Booklet of the Keadue church, where Lord Kingston's agent Tatlow was conducting wholesale clearances on the Roscommon shore of Lough Allen even as the body of Lord Leitrim lay in Milford courthouse, belong to the same continuum of landlord violence and tenant resistance. The McManus family, whose history links County Durham to north Roscommon and County Leitrim, inhabited this landscape of contested tenure, and the name of Lord Leitrim, the county whose title the murdered earl bore, resonated through the social memory of the entire region with a particular and permanent force.

IX. Conclusion: The Road to Milford

William Sydney Clements, 3rd Earl of Leitrim, was a man who combined genuine agricultural ambition with a disposition so imperious, so careless of human suffering, and so apparently incapable of the ordinary decencies of the landlord-tenant relationship, that he generated, over the course of twenty-four years, a hatred of a quality and intensity that outlasted his death by generations. Whether the sexual allegations against him are true or false—and the honest answer is that the evidence does not permit certainty either way—the structural cruelty of his landlordship

is documented beyond dispute in eviction records, newspaper reports, legal papers, and the folk memory of two counties.

On the morning of 2 April 1878, three men who had crossed Mulroy Bay in the darkness waited on the Milford road as two hired carriages came towards them. What they did left three people dead, including a twenty-five-year-old court clerk who had been in Lord Leitrim's service only a short time and bore no part of the responsibility for his employer's conduct. The deaths of John Makim and Charles Buchanan are the human cost that no account of the Cratlagh Wood ambush can responsibly pass over. But in the political culture of pre-Land League Ireland—a culture shaped by the Famine, the clearances, the Penal Laws, and the entire accumulated weight of colonial dispossession—the killing of Lord Leitrim was greeted, from Donegal to Dublin, with something other than horror. The mob that hissed his coffin on the Liffey, the community that protected his killers for decades, and the men of Fanad who erected a Celtic Cross to their memory in 1960 were all, in their different ways, giving expression to a verdict that the history of the 3rd Earl's landlordship had made, in the judgement of those who had lived under it, entirely just.

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‘The Land of Ireland for the People of Ireland’: County Mayo and the Origins of the Land League, 1879–1882

I. Introduction: The Land Question in the West

Of all the counties of Ireland, County Mayo has the most direct claim to be the birthplace of the most consequential agrarian movement in modern Irish history. It was in Mayo that the conditions of rural desperation, tenant organisation, and political opportunity converged most sharply in the late 1870s. It was in Mayo that the series of mass meetings began that transformed local grievance into a national campaign. It was in Mayo, at Daly’s Hotel in Castlebar on 16 August 1879, that the Land League of Mayo was formally founded. And it was in a Mayo townland, on the shores of Lough Mask, that the League’s most celebrated tactic gave the English language a new word. The story of the Land League in Mayo is therefore not merely the local backdrop to a national movement; it is, in a very precise sense, the story from which that national movement grew.

The essay that follows traces the origins, development, and consequences of the Land League agitation in Mayo from the late 1870s to the suppression of the League in October 1882. It begins with the structural conditions of Mayo’s rural economy: the legacy of the Famine, the character of the landlord system, and the particular vulnerabilities of the small tenant farmers of Connaught. It proceeds to the figure who gave those conditions their most articulate and historically effective expression: Michael Davitt, a Mayo man whose personal experience of eviction and imprisonment made him the irreplaceable catalyst of the Land War. It then examines the sequence of events that led from the

Irishtown meeting of April 1879 to the founding of the national Irish Land League in October of that year, and analyses the principal tactics of the Land War—mass demonstration, rent resistance, boycotting, and agrarian agitation—in their Mayo context. Finally, it considers the legislative outcomes of the Land War and the long-term transformation of Irish land ownership that the League set in motion, with a particular eye to the connections between the Mayo agitation and the landlord–tenant conflicts that ran through the north Roscommon parishes explored elsewhere in this volume.

II. The Structural Conditions: Land, Poverty, and the Legacy of the Famine

The social and economic landscape of County Mayo in the 1870s was shaped above all by the catastrophe of the Great Famine of 1845–1852. The county had been among the worst-affected in all Ireland: its population had fallen from 435,000 in 1841 to 274,000 by 1851, a loss of more than a third in a single decade, through a combination of death and emigration that left whole townlands vacant and thousands of small farms consolidated into the larger holdings of surviving tenants or absorbed into landlord demesnes. The Famine did not, however, redistribute land on any equitable basis. The basic structure of landlordism in Mayo remained intact. In 1878, across Ireland as a whole, just 3,700 landowners owned 89 per cent of the land, the majority of them absentees; half of all tenants rented farms of under fifteen acres, many on annual leases terminable at short notice and offering no security of tenure. In Mayo, where the holdings were smaller, the land poorer, and the landlords often more distant, those figures translated into a daily reality of precariousness and dependency that the post-Famine prosperity

of the 1850s and 1860s had done little to alleviate.[1]

The crisis that precipitated the Land War of 1879–1882 was in origin meteorological. From 1877 a series of wet summers and poor harvests reduced the earning capacity of Mayo's small farmers at precisely the moment when the Long Depression in European and American agricultural prices was lowering livestock values and reducing the income available from seasonal migration labour to England and Scotland. By 1879, which was one of the wettest years on record, the potato crop in Mayo had failed for the third successive year; the autumn harvest stood at barely 1.4 tons per acre, less than half of the normal yield. Memories of 1847 were not yet a generation old, and the prospect of another famine revived them with terrible immediacy. Rents that had been set in the more prosperous years were now wholly beyond the means of many tenants to pay, yet landlords, their incomes themselves reduced by the agricultural depression, showed little inclination to grant the abatements the situation demanded. Evictions for non-payment of rent began to multiply. The conditions for agrarian mobilisation were, by the spring of 1879, almost precisely those that a student of the Famine might have predicted.

III. Michael Davitt: A Mayo Life and Its Formation

No account of the Land League in Mayo can begin anywhere other than with the life of Michael Davitt. He was born on 25 March 1846 in the village of Straide, County Mayo, the third of five children of Martin and

[1]Land War, Wikipedia, citing Philip Bull, Land, Politics, and Nationalism: A Study of the Irish Land Question (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996). The autumn potato harvest in Mayo in 1879 was only 1.4 tons per acre, less than half the previous year's yield.

Catherine Davitt, small tenant farmers on the John Knox estate. His father, literate in both Irish and English and an O'Connellite in politics, was also a Ribbonman; a member of the rural secret society that pre-dated the more formalised nationalist organisations of the mid-century. The family's political consciousness was therefore not merely inherited but embedded in a tradition of agrarian resistance. It was not, however, sufficient to protect them from the fate that overtook thousands of Connaught families in the decade of the Famine. In September 1850, when Michael was four years old, the Davitts were evicted from their holding for non-payment of rent and their cottage was burned down behind them.[2]

Catherine Davitt refused the workhouse, refusing, as the Dictionary of Irish Biography records, to be separated from her son. The family travelled to England, eventually settling in Haslingden in Lancashire, where many families from the Straide district had already established themselves in the cotton-mill economy of the north-west. It was at Haslingden, at the age of nine or ten, that Michael Davitt began working in a cotton mill; a year later, in an industrial accident that would mark him for life, a machine crushed his right arm, which was subsequently amputated at the shoulder. The injury, and the schooling that followed it, transformed what might have been the life of an anonymous Irish mill-worker into something else. Largely self-taught, Davitt acquired French, Italian, and Irish alongside English, worked as a typesetter, and absorbed the political culture of the Lancashire Irish working class—a culture in

[2]T. W. Moody, Davitt and Irish Revolution, 1846–1882 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 3. Moody's biography remains the standard scholarly account of Davitt's life and the origins of the Land League.

which Fenianism was 'popular among working-class Irish emigrants' and where, as one IRB member recalled, 'every smart respectable young fellow' from the Irish community joined.

Davitt joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood in 1865, rose to the position of organising secretary for England and Scotland by 1868, and was arrested at Paddington Station in London on 14 May 1870 in the act of receiving a consignment of arms destined for Ireland. Convicted of treason-felony, he was sentenced to fifteen years in Dartmoor Prison. He served seven and a half years under conditions of considerable severity—solitary confinement, stone-breaking in winter, and a regime whose harshness became a public scandal through letters he managed to smuggle to the press. It was in Dartmoor that Davitt formed the convictions that would make him the founding force of the Land League: that the ownership of the land by the people was the only solution to Ireland's problems, and that the Fenian and constitutional wings of Irish nationalism must be brought to work together on the land issue if either was to succeed.[3]

Released on ticket of leave in December 1877, Davitt was greeted in Dublin as a national hero. He embarked on lecture tours of England, Scotland, and—crucially—the United States, where he met John Devoy, the Clan na Gael leader, and absorbed the ideas of Henry George on the relationship between land monopoly and poverty. The 'New Departure' that Davitt promoted on his return; a strategic alliance between the

[3]Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. 'Michael Davitt'. Davitt was sentenced to fifteen years in Dartmoor Prison, of which he served seven and a half years before release on ticket of leave in December 1877.

physical-force republicans, the constitutional nationalists under Parnell, and the land agitators, was the political framework within which the Land League would operate. When he returned to Mayo in 1879 to find the county once again on the verge of famine conditions, Davitt had both the theoretical framework and the political connections to act. The experience of his own family's eviction from a Straide cottage nearly thirty years before was, as he recorded in his memoir [4] The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland (1904), 'almost my first-remembered experience of my own life and of the existence of landlordism.'[5] It had never left him.

IV. James Daly, the 'Connaught Telegraph', and the Irishtown Meeting, April 1879

To understand the Land League as it actually emerged in Mayo, it is necessary to place alongside Davitt a figure who has sometimes been overshadowed in the historical memory of the movement: James Daly (1835–1910), the editor and proprietor of the Connaught Telegraph[6] in Castlebar, and a member of the Mayo Tenants Defence Association. It was Daly who coined the phrase that became the slogan of the entire

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[4]Moody, Davitt and Irish Revolution, pp. 135–148. The 'New Departure' is discussed at length in Samuel Clark, Social Origins of the Irish Land War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 234–241. Davitt's account of his meeting with Devoy in the United States is given in The Fall of Feudalism, pp. 112–120.

[5]Dictionary of Irish Biography, s.v. 'Davitt, Michael': "Memories of that terrible day fuelled Davitt's lifelong sense of indignation and his exasperation at the Irish peasantry's abject failure to resist such treatment." Michael Davitt, The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland (London and New York: Harper & Brothers, 1904), p. 11: "Almost my first-remembered experience of my own life and of the existence of landlordism was our eviction in 1852."

[6]Irish National Land League, Wikipedia, citing T. W. Moody and the Connaught Telegraph 2 November 1878: the formal public demand 'the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland' was reported in connection with the founding meeting of the Mayo Tenants Defence Association in Castlebar on 26 October 1878. On Daly see Paul Bew, Land and the National Question in Ireland, 1858–82 (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978), pp. 52–56.

agitation—'the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland'—in the pages of the Connaught Telegraph in November 1878; it was Daly who championed the cause of the small farmers of Mayo in print and in person across the preceding years; and it was Daly who organised, in the summer of 1878–1879, the founding meeting of the Mayo Tenants Defence Association in Castlebar on 26 October 1878. When Davitt arrived in Castlebar after his release from prison, he was met by Daly and the two men immediately recognised in each other the complementary elements of what was about to become a transformative public campaign.

The first great public demonstration of the Land War took place at Irishtown, a hamlet near Claremorris on the borders of Mayo, Roscommon, and Galway, on 20 April 1879. The proximate cause was the threat by a local Catholic clergyman, Canon Ulick Burke, to evict tenants on his land for non-payment of rent—a detail that testified to the universality of the grievance, which was not confined to Protestant absentee landlords. Davitt helped to organise the meeting, though he could not attend in person as he was still subject to police supervision on ticket of leave. The event was chaired by James Daly and addressed by John O'Connor Power MP, the Fenian Thomas Brennan, the Glasgow-based activist John Ferguson, and Daly himself. The attendance was estimated at between seven thousand and twenty thousand people, arriving from all parts of Mayo and the neighbouring counties of Roscommon and Galway.[7]

[7]Encyclopedia.com, s.v. 'Land War of 1879 to 1882', citing Samuel Clark, Social Origins of the Irish Land War, p. 268. The Irishtown meeting drew estimates ranging from 7,000 to 20,000 attendees, with the Connaught Telegraph of 26 April 1879 describing it as the largest public demonstration since the days of O'Connell.

The outcome of the Irishtown meeting was an immediate vindication of the mass demonstration as a political instrument. Canon Burke was persuaded to reduce rents on his estate by twenty-five per cent and to withdraw the threatened eviction notices.[8] The Connaught Telegraph of 26 April described it as 'the largest public demonstration since the days of O'Connell,' and it proved, as Davitt had hoped, that organised, disciplined, and peaceful mass action could compel real and immediate concessions from those in possession of land. Further meetings followed rapidly across the county. On 8 June 1879, Davitt persuaded Charles Stewart Parnell—at that point the rising star of the Irish Parliamentary Party but as yet uncommitted to the land agitation—to address a meeting in Westport in protest against the Marquess of Sligo, the largest landowner in Mayo. Some eight thousand people attended; Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam had publicly denounced the meeting in the Freeman's Journal on 7 June, but Parnell proceeded regardless.[9] His speech—in which he advocated peasant proprietorship and urged tenants to hold a firm grip on their homesteads—was reported across the British press and marked his decisive entry into the land question as a national political issue.

V. The Foundation of the League: Castlebar, August 1879

By the summer of 1879 the conditions were in place for the formalisation

[8]Michael Davitt Museum website (michaeldavittmuseum.ie), 'History': "The event, chaired by James Daly of Castlebar, drew thousands of people who gathered peacefully to call for fair rents and an end to forced evictions. The meeting had a powerful impact. It led to eviction notices being withdrawn and rent reductions of up to twenty-five percent."

[9]Land War, Wikipedia. Parnell's speech in Westport on 8 June 1879 drew 8,000 people and was widely commented upon in the press as far afield as London. Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam had denounced the meeting in a letter to the Freeman's Journal on 7 June, but Parnell proceeded regardless.

of the agitation into an organisation. On 16 August 1879 a representative meeting of delegates from across County Mayo assembled at Daly's Hotel on the Mall in Castlebar. Michael Davitt read aloud the document embodying the rules and objects of the proposed association, which was to be known as the National Land League of Mayo. Its stated objects were twofold: to watch over the interests of the people from any unjust exercise of power by landlords, and to work for the substitution of peasant ownership for the existing system of landlordism.[10]

The founding of the Mayo League was a carefully engineered act. Davitt and Daly had structured it to attract not only the small tenants most immediately threatened by the agricultural crisis, but also the shopkeepers, local merchants, and Catholic clergy whose support was indispensable to any mass movement in rural Ireland. The three months between August and October 1879 saw an extraordinary proliferation of local League branches across Mayo and the other counties of Connaught, each holding meetings, passing resolutions, and administering the moral code of the movement: the injunction not to pay excessive rents, not to take land from which the previous tenant had been evicted, and not to have any social or commercial dealings with landlords or their agents who persisted in demanding unjust rents or carrying out evictions.[11]

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[10]Freeman's Journal, 18 August 1879, quoted in Encyclopedia.com, s.v. 'Establishment of the National Land League of Mayo' (Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture). The full text of the founding document read out by Davitt specified two objects: to watch over the interests of the people from 'an unjust or capricious exercise of power or privilege on the part of landlords', and to work for the abolition of the system of landlordism and substitution of a peasant proprietary.

[11]Encyclopedia.com, s.v. 'Land War of 1879 to 1882'. The phrase 'lawless law' was coined by Davitt himself to describe the moral code that the Land League propagated in rural Ireland, whereby tenants who paid rents deemed excessive, or took land from which the previous tenant had been evicted, were subject to communal sanction.

On 21 October 1879 the national organisation was formally inaugurated at a meeting in Dublin, now at the Imperial Hotel rather than in Castlebar, superseding the Mayo body. Charles Stewart Parnell was elected President of the Irish National Land League; Davitt, Andrew Kettle, and Thomas Brennan were appointed as honorary secretaries. The unification of Fenian, constitutional, and agrarian energies in a single organisation; the political goal of the 'New Departure', had been achieved. Branches were rapidly established throughout the country, and the League received substantial financial backing from the Irish diaspora in the United States, where the American Land League raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for famine relief and political action. Parnell and Davitt undertook a lecture tour of North America in the winter of 1879–80 to consolidate that support. The land agitation had become a national and an Atlantic movement.[12]

VI. The Tactics of the Land War: Boycott, Rent Strike, and Agrarian Coercion

The Land War that the League prosecuted between 1879 and 1882 employed a repertoire of tactics that ranged from the constitutionally unimpeachable to the legally precarious and, at its margins, to outright agrarian violence. Davitt labelled the League's characteristic moral code 'the lawless law': a communal discipline that called on the rural population to refuse payment of rents deemed excessive, to refuse to take or work land from which a previous tenant had been unjustly evicted,

[12]Irish National Land League, Wikipedia. On the founding meeting of 21 October 1879 see Moody, Davitt and Irish Revolution, pp. 313–320. Andrew Kettle, Michael Davitt, and Thomas Brennan were appointed as honorary secretaries. The American Land League subsequently raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for famine relief and political action.

and to refuse all social and commercial relations with those who violated those norms. This code was enforced not by violence—the League leadership consistently denounced agrarian crime, and Davitt himself was its most vocal critic—but by the weight of community sanction in districts where the social fabric was close enough to make exclusion a genuinely devastating penalty.

The most celebrated instance of that sanction, and the one that gave the English language a new word, arose in the autumn of 1880 at Lough Mask in County Mayo. Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott (1832–1897), a retired army officer who had served in Ireland, was the land agent for Lord Erne's estate in the Lough Mask area near Ballinrobe. He had leased Lough Mask House and its surrounding three hundred acres and also managed Lord Erne's neighbouring estate of 1,500 acres, comprising thirty-eight tenant farmers. Boycott had made himself unpopular through a combination of personal high-handedness and strict enforcement of the terms of tenancy, and in August 1880 his farm labourers, encouraged by the local Land League branch, had struck successfully for a wage increase. In September 1880, when Boycott attempted to serve eviction notices against eleven defaulting tenants who were demanding a twenty-five per cent rent reduction rather than the ten per cent abatement Lord Erne was prepared to grant, an angry crowd of local women drove the process-servers and their police escort back to Lough Mask House.[13]

[13]Dictionary of Irish Biography, s.v. 'Boycott, Charles Cunningham' (dib.ie). The campaign against Boycott was 'largely orchestrated by Fr John O'Malley, a local parish priest and president of The Neale branch of the Land League.' Lord Erne's estate at Lough Mask comprised thirty-eight tenant farmers paying rents of £500 a year, of which Boycott received 10 per cent as agent.

Almost simultaneously, Parnell had articulated in a speech at Ennis on 19 September 1880 the policy of social ostracism that the League would employ against landlords and land-grabbers: the entire community was to refuse all dealings with such persons, withdrawing labour, withholding custom, and avoiding all social contact. It was Fr John O'Malley, the local parish priest and president of The Neale branch of the Land League, who, in a conversation with the American journalist James Redpath, hit upon the word that would propagate the tactic across the world. He proposed that, rather than the Latinate and unfamiliar 'ostracise,' which he believed would mean little to the local peasantry, the community's action should be named after its first significant target. Within days, the blacksmith, the postman, and the laundress had stopped serving Boycott. Shops in Ballinrobe refused him provisions. His workers abandoned his fields. His young nephew, attempting to deliver the mail, was intercepted on the road and warned off.[14]

Boycott's letter to The Times on 14 October 1880, describing the howling mob that had greeted the process-server, brought the story to the attention of the world's press and simultaneously established the word 'boycott' in the vocabulary of social and political life.[15] The response of the Unionist press in Ireland was to organise a 'Boycott Relief Expedition': fifty-seven loyalists from Counties Cavan and

[14]Charles Boycott, Wikipedia. The word was coined, almost certainly by Fr O'Malley in conversation with the American journalist James Redpath, as an alternative to 'ostracise,' which O'Malley believed would mean little to the local peasantry. It first appeared in print in Redpath's inter-Ocean article of 12 October 1880.
[15]The Irish Story, s.v. 'Shunned, Ostracised, Excommunicated … Boycotted' (theirishstory.com). Boycott wrote to The Times on 14 October 1880: "a howling mob of people, who yelled and hooted at the members of my family. On the ensuing day, September 23rd, the people collected in crowds upon my farm." On 1 December he took the mail boat for Wales.

Monaghan arrived at Lough Mask on 12 November to harvest Boycott's crops, escorted by almost a thousand troops of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the regular army. The entire operation cost approximately £10,000—roughly thirty times the value of the crops they harvested.[16] Boycott himself was finally driven from Mayo, travelling to Dublin under police protection after a hostile reception in Ballinrobe, taking the mail boat to Wales on 1 December 1880, and later departing for the United States under the assumed name of Mr and Mrs Charles Cunningham. The word his name had generated, however, remained. By the end of 1880, 'boycott' had been adopted in English and in several other European languages as the standard term for the organised withdrawal of social and commercial relations from an individual or institution.

The resort to boycotting and rent strikes was not without its costs. Between 1879 and 1881 crimes related to the Land War rose from twenty-five to fifty-eight per cent of all crime in Ireland, a statistic that troubled the League's leadership and provided the government with the pretext for coercion. The distinction between the League's organised and constitutionally defensible tactics and the individual acts of violence—the threatening letters, the cattle-maiming, the occasional shootings—was real but difficult to maintain in the heat of agrarian conflict. The government's response was to introduce a Coercion Act in 1881, the Protection of Persons and Property (Ireland) Act, which gave the

[16]Dictionary of Irish Biography, s.v. 'Boycott': "On 12 November fifty-seven loyalists from Cavan and Monaghan, 'the Boycott Relief Expedition,' arrived at Lough Mask with an escort of almost a thousand troops. After harvesting Boycott's crops they left on 26 November; the whole operation cost £10,000 – about thirty times the value of the crops."

executive power to intern without trial those suspected of agrarian agitation.[17]

VII. The Land Act of 1881 and the Suppression of the League

The political consequence of the Land War's sustained pressure was to force Prime Minister Gladstone's Liberal government to address the land question legislatively in terms the League had itself demanded. The Bessborough Commission, established in June 1880 to enquire into the operation of Gladstone's earlier 1870 Land Act, heard evidence from eighty landlords, seventy agents, and over five hundred tenants in sixty-five sessions across the autumn and winter of 1880–1881, and concluded in a report that 'freedom of contract, in the case of the majority of Irish tenants, large and small, does not really exist.' By a majority of four to one, the commissioners declared in favour of the Three Fs that the League had demanded since its foundation.[18]

The Land Law (Ireland) Act of August 1881 was the legislative result. It granted Irish tenants the Three Fs in law: fair rent, to be determined by a Land Commission if the parties could not agree; fixity of tenure, ending the landlord's right of arbitrary eviction; and free sale, permitting a tenant to sell his interest in his holding to the highest bidder. It was, as John Dillon observed with a prescient mixture of satisfaction and alarm, an

[17]Encyclopedia.com, s.v. 'Land War of 1879 to 1882.' "Between 1879 and 1881, crimes related to the Land War rose from 25% to 58% of all crime in Ireland." Davitt and other League leaders 'denounced agrarian crime in strong language,' but the organisations were not in control of their rank-and-file.

[18]Land Law (Ireland) Act 1881, Wikipedia. The Bessborough Commission had heard evidence from 80 landlords, 70 agents, and over 500 tenants and declared by a majority of four to one in favour of the Three Fs. John Dillon remarked: "I very much fear that this Act was drawn by a man who was set to study the whole history of our organisation and was told to draw an Act that would kill the Land League."

Act that appeared to have been 'drawn by a man who was set to study the whole history of our organisation and was told to draw an Act that would kill the Land League.' Gladstone's calculation proved, in the medium term, correct: as eligible tenant farmers rushed into the new Land Commission courts to seek rent reductions, and as those courts consistently granted them, the League's solidarity began to fracture. The Act had fallen short of what the radical wing of the movement—including Davitt, who had always aspired to the nationalisation rather than the peasant purchase of the land—had demanded, and it excluded tenants in arrears and leaseholders from its provisions; but for the larger and more prosperous tenant farmers who had increasingly dominated the movement as it spread beyond the distressed western districts, it was adequate.[19]

The League's leadership, unwilling to see the organisation dismantled by legislative concession, attempted to hold the line by instructing members to await the outcome of carefully selected test cases before entering the courts. This manoeuvre provided the government with its justification for acting against the League leadership. In October 1881 Parnell, Dillon, and other leading figures were imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol under the Coercion Act. From prison they issued the 'No Rent Manifesto,' calling for a national rent strike, but the Manifesto was largely ignored throughout Ireland. The Land League was formally proclaimed an illegal organisation on 20 October 1881. For the next six months, the Ladies'

[19]Encyclopedia.com, s.v. 'Land Acts of 1870 and 1881.' The Land Commission set up by the 1881 Act began to reduce rents in many cases, and as farmers rushed into the courts to seek abatements, Gladstone's political gamble succeeded in undermining League solidarity. The Act is widely regarded as having 'set into motion the slow, but irreversible end to landlordism in rural Ireland.'

Land League, founded in January 1881 on the initiative of Anna Parnell, maintained the agitation, establishing relief committees and supporting evicted families.[20] By the spring of 1882, with the principal leaders released under the Kilmainham Treaty and the Land Act already reshaping the basis of rural tenancy, the first and most dramatic phase of the Irish Land War was effectively concluded.

VIII. Legacy: From Land War to Land Ownership

The Land Acts that followed the 1881 legislation: the Ashbourne Act of 1885, which provided for tenant purchase on a basis of government loans, and above all the Wyndham Land Act of 1903, which financed the systematic transfer of Irish land from landlord to tenant on a massive scale, were the legislative children of the Land War. The transformation of Irish rural society that they brought about was profound: by the early twentieth century the absentee landlord system that had shaped Irish agriculture since the Cromwellian plantations had been, for practical purposes, abolished. The tenant farmer of the 1870s, paying rent at the landlord's discretion and liable to eviction on short notice, had become, within a generation, the freeholder of the land he farmed. It was a social revolution of the first order, and it was, in origin, a Mayo revolution.[21]

Michael Davitt died in Dublin on 30 May 1906 at the age of sixty, from

[20]Land War, Wikipedia, citing Irish National Land League Wikipedia. The No Rent Manifesto was issued by Parnell and his imprisoned colleagues from Kilmainham Gaol in October 1881, but was largely ignored throughout Ireland. The League was formally proclaimed an illegal organisation on 20 October 1881.

[21]On the Wyndham Land Act 1903 see Clark, Social Origins, pp. 390–395; on the broader transformation of Irish land ownership see Terence Dooley, The Decline of the Big House in Ireland (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001), pp. 45–62. The Ashbourne Act of 1885 had been the first effective land-purchase scheme, offering tenants the full purchase price of their holdings as a government loan repayable over forty-nine years.

blood poisoning following a tooth extraction. He had continued to the end to hold the more radical position: that the land should be nationalised rather than transferred to private peasant ownership, that had eventually put him at odds with the Parnellite mainstream of the movement he had helped to create. His will requested burial at Straide 'without any funeral demonstration.' Over twenty thousand people filed past his coffin in Dublin; a procession of almost a mile accompanied the train from Foxford to the grounds of Straide Friary, where he was buried beside the ruined church in which he had been baptised. That the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland attended the funeral was, as the Dictionary of Irish Biography observes, a public index of the dramatic distance the former Fenian prisoner had travelled. In his will he left 'to Ireland the undying prayer for the absolute freedom and independence which it was my life's ambition to try and obtain for her.' [22]

IX. The Local Dimension: Mayo, Roscommon, and the Kilronan Connection

The Land War was not, of course, confined to Mayo. Its agitation spread rapidly across Connaught and the rest of Ireland, and the tactics developed at Lough Mask and Irishtown were replicated in every county where the tenant–landlord relationship had produced the conditions for mass resistance. In the territory most immediately relevant to this volume—the parishes of north County Roscommon adjacent to the Mayo border—the Kingston Evictions of the 1880s documented in the

[22]Moody, Davitt and Irish Revolution, p. 550; Dictionary of Irish Biography, s.v. 'Davitt, Michael.' Davitt's will stipulated: "To all my friends I leave kind thoughts; to my enemies the fullest possible forgiveness, and to Ireland the undying prayer for the absolute freedom and independence which it was my life's ambition to try and obtain for her."

Rededication Booklet of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady at Keadue represent a local instance of the same conflict. Fr Reddy, Parish Priest of Kilronan, emerges from that account as one of the key organisers of tenant resistance in the Logh Allen area, operating alongside the English landowner and reformer Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, whose involvement in the eviction protests ultimately resulted in his imprisonment in Galway. The two hundred to two hundred and fifty policemen assembled for each eviction, the announcement by the blowing of horns in the valley, the tenants supported by the Irish Land League and the 'No Rent' campaign—all are recognisable features of the Land War as it was conducted at the local level across Connaught in the years between 1880 and 1887.[23]

The significance of the Land League within the broader narrative of this collection is therefore not simply that it was born in Mayo. It is that the movement it generated was the immediate context within which the social and religious communities this volume examines: the parishes of north Roscommon, the mining communities of Arigna and the Kilronan valley, the dispersed families whose emigration tracks the lines of this book, lived out the most economically decisive decade of the nineteenth century. The Land War of 1879–1882 did not resolve the national question; it was not designed to, though Parnell hoped to use it as a lever for Home Rule. What it did resolve, gradually, across a further quarter of a century of legislation, was the land question that Davitt had identified,

[23]Rededication of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, Keadue: Souvenir Booklet (Roscommon Herald, Boyle, 1981), pp. [17–18]: Hugh Gibbons, 'The Kingston Evictions.' The Kilronan evictions form a local instance of the broader Land War agitation, with Fr Reddy P.P. acting as one of the key organisers of tenant resistance and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt providing public support before his imprisonment in Galway.

from his earliest memories of a burning cottage in Straide, as the foundational injustice of Irish life.[24]

X. Conclusion: The Land of Ireland

The Irish Land League was the product of a particular convergence: a structural crisis in the rural economy of the west, a generation of men and women whose experience of the Famine and its aftermath had produced a specific and transmissible rage, the organisational genius of Michael Davitt and the journalistic platform of James Daly, the political acumen of Charles Stewart Parnell, and the financial resources of the Irish diaspora in America. All of these came together in County Mayo in 1879 because all of them were, in some sense, already there: in the hollowed-out hillsides, in the famine graves, in the stubble-fields of a failed harvest, in the institutional memory of a newspaper that had been naming the grievance for years, in the personal history of a one-armed man from Straide who carried in his body the mark of everything that landlordism had cost his people.

James Daly's phrase; 'the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland', was at once a demand, a history, and a prophecy. The demand was for redistribution; the history was the long story of Cromwellian settlement, Penal Laws, and the Famine that had concentrated Irish land in the hands of a small Anglo-Irish Protestant landlord class; the prophecy was of a rural Ireland in which the people who worked the land would own it.

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[24]Bew, Land and the National Question, p. 214. On the relationship between the Land League and later nationalism see R. V. Comerford, 'The Land War and the Politics of Distress,' in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), A New History of Ireland, vi: Ireland Under the Union II, 1870–1921 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 26–52.

That prophecy, mediated through three years of mass agitation, legal reform, a new word in the English language, and the long attrition of subsequent land legislation, was eventually fulfilled. County Mayo, and the figure who left it as an evicted four-year-old and returned to it as the founding force of the Land League, deserves the principal share of the credit for that fulfilment.

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PART FOUR

Faith and Community

Faith, Stone, and Community: The Catholic Parish of Kilronan and the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, Keadue. Religious and Cultural History

I. Introduction: A Durham Copy of a Roscommon Booklet

Among the primary sources that illuminate the religious life of north County Roscommon, the Rededication Souvenir Booklet of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady at Keadue occupies a distinctive place. Printed at the Roscommon Herald press in Boyle and produced to mark the ceremony of Sunday, 5 July 1981, it is not a work of scholarly history but a devotional and commemorative document compiled by and for a living community. Yet within its twenty-seven printed pages it contains a wealth of material that no other single source preserves: an architectural history of the building, a succession of parish priests with biographical notes, a series of essays on the faith life of the parish by priests who had left for missions in Hong Kong, Seattle, Albany, and Nigeria, a meticulous account of the Kingston Evictions of the 1880s, reflections on the traditions of St Lasair's holy well, and a portrait of the parish's musical heritage reaching back beyond Turlough O'Carolan.[1]

The copy of the booklet that informs this essay carries an additional layer of significance. Its inside cover bears a handwritten inscription: 'Presented by Father J. P. Masterson, 1985.' It was addressed to the

[1]Parish of Kilronan, Rededication of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, Keadue: Souvenir Booklet (printed at Roscommon Herald, Boyle, 1981) (hereafter Rededication Booklet). The ceremony took place on Sunday, 5 July 1981. The copy consulted here was presented by Fr J. P. Masterson in 1985 to the author, M. McManus, of Durham City, and subsequently passed to the McManus family. See also 'Kilronan Then and Now: A Collection of heritage, history, folklore and nostalgia from Kilronan Parish, Co. Roscommon', 2010, edited and published by Kilronan Then and Now Committee.

author, M. McManus, Durham City: a County Durham address that places the booklet firmly within the story of the McManus family and the Kilronan–Durham connection that runs through this volume. That Fr Masterson thought to present the booklet to a Durham household in 1985 is itself a small act of historical preservation, ensuring that a record of the parish's renewal would survive in the hands of people who understood why Keadue mattered. The booklet is thus simultaneously a parish document, a diaspora document, and a family document.

II. The Foreword: Dr Cathal Daly and the Architecture of Revival

The Foreword to the Booklet was written by Dr Cathal B. Daly, at that time Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, the diocese in which the parish of Kilronan lies, and later Cardinal Primate of All Ireland. His engagement with the Keadue church was not merely episcopal duty: it was personal, rooted in the family connection explored later in this essay. The Foreword opens with an appreciation of the building's architectural character that sets the tone for the entire document, identifying the church as 'one of the better examples of the neo-Gothic revival in Ireland and a fine product of the inspiration of Pugin, mediated through one of his ablest Irish disciples, J. J. McCarthy.'[2]

Daly traces the architectural significance of the church within the wider cultural movement of Irish national revival. He quotes the testimony of Gavin Duffy that McCarthy had told him he had caught the first impulse

[2]Cathal B. Daly, "Foreword," Rededication Booklet, p. [1]. At the time of writing Daly held the title "Dr Cathal Daly" as Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois; he became Archbishop of Armagh in 1990 and Cardinal in 1991. He describes the church as "one of the better examples of the neo-Gothic revival in Ireland and a fine product of the inspiration of Pugin, mediated through one of his ablest Irish disciples, J. J. McCarthy."

to revive the Irish Gothic from The Nation[3], the newspaper founded by Thomas Davis, John Dillon, and Gavin Duffy in 1842. The church at Kilronan was, in Daly's reading, one expression of a comprehensive national movement of recovery—a movement that encompassed literature, history, antiquities, and the arts as well as ecclesiastical architecture. His closing invocation is equally characteristic: 'Much that J. J. McCarthy proposed as a policy for the "Irish Ecclesiological Society" which he founded could still be advanced as a challenge and a programme for the Church in Ireland today.'

III. Building the Church: 1860, 1885, and 1981

The Booklet provides, on its second page, a meticulous three-part chronological account of the building, drawn substantially from Jeanne Sheehy's scholarly study of McCarthy and from the files of the Roscommon Herald.[4] In September 1860 it was announced that the church was to be built and that the foundation stone had been laid; the architects were named as McCarthy and O'Connell, the partnership formed between J. J. McCarthy and Daniel O'Connell, grandson of the Liberator. By 1862, when the building was well under way, McCarthy alone was named as architect. The plan comprised the usual nave and chancel, aisles, side chapels, south porch, with double bell-cots on the west gable of the nave, supported by a receding arch. The style was Early

[3]Daly, "Foreword," Rededication Booklet. The quotation from Gavin Duffy is embedded in the Foreword: "An architect who had built more Celtic Churches than any man of Irish birth since the Goban Saor taught our ancestors to construct the Round Towers told me that he caught the first impulse to revive the Irish Gothic in ecclesiastical buildings from THE NATION at that period."

[4]"In 1860 . . . The Architect," Rededication Booklet, p. [2]. The source for the architectural history is identified as Jeanne Sheehy, J. J. McCarthy and the Gothic Revival in Ireland. "In 1862, when the building was well under way, McCarthy alone was named as architect."

Decorated Gothic, the materials red sandstone with white limestone dressings. The site was granted free by the landlord, E. King Tenison of Kilronan Castle, who also subscribed to the cost. The contractor was Mr Barker.

The Roscommon Herald of 5 September 1885 reported the solemn dedication of the new Catholic Church at Keadue, which took place on Tuesday, 8 September, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The ceremony was performed by Most Reverend Dr Woodlock, Lord Bishop of Ardagh, who by special permission of the Holy See bestowed the Papal Benediction. The sermon was preached by Most Rev. Dr. Brownrigg, Lord Bishop of Ossory.[5] Admission tickets were priced between sixpence and five shillings. The parish priest at the time of the dedication was Canon Patrick Reddy, under whose pastorate also St Patrick's Church at Ballyfarnon was dedicated in March 1889 and many schools were built in the parish.

The 1981 renovation, the occasion for which the Booklet was produced, brought the church into conformity with the liturgical demands of the Second Vatican Council. The total cost of the restoration and re-styling, together with major undertakings on the church grounds, was approximately £80,000. The renovation team assembled by Fr Masterson combined professional distinction with local connection: the architect was Noel McAree; the builder, Con MacDermott; the artist, Ray Carroll;

[5]"In 1885 . . . ," Rededication Booklet, p. [2]. The Roscommon Herald report of 5 September 1885 describes the dedication by "Most Rev. Dr. Woodlock, Lord Bishop of Ardagh, by special permission, will bestow the Papal Benediction." The sermon was preached by Most Rev. Dr. Brownrigg, Lord Bishop of Ossory.

the windows were executed by Myles Kearney of Dublin; electrical work was carried out by Colm O'Donnell; seating by Charley Duignan of Dromod; grounds and landscaping by Jarleth Harte and Tom J. Quinn; tarmacadam by John Nicholson of Boyle; and the Clerk of Works was Pat Grafton.[6]

Dr Daly's Foreword praised the partnership of McAree and Carroll with particular warmth. He observed that McAree possessed 'a special feeling for Irish neo-Gothic, and a special talent for revealing the original purity of its perspectives, the majesty of its elevations,' while Carroll's work as artist was 'a fulfilment, even more consummate than was possible in McCarthy's day, of the dream of a renewed Irish religious art, reflecting though never merely copying, medieval Celtic models.' The population of the parish at the time of the rededication stood at 1,230.[7]

IV. Fr Masterson, the Parish, and the Altar of Cardinal Daly

Fr J. P. Masterson's essay of thanks, which occupies page three of the Booklet, is one of the most revealing documents in the entire collection. A native of Moyne, County Longford, ordained in 1948, and a man who had served in Nigeria, Leitrim, Cavan, Offaly, Kenya, and Ferbane before his appointment to Keadue in January 1979, Masterson brought to the

[6]"In 1981 . . . ," Rededication Booklet, p. [2]. The full renovation team: Architect, Noel McAree; Builder, Con MacDermott; Artist, Ray Carroll; Windows, Myles Kearney, Dublin; Electrical, Colm O'Donnell; Seating, Charley Duignan, Dromod; Grounds and Landscaping, Jarleth Harte, Tom J. Quinn; Tarmacadam, John Nicholson, Boyle; Clerk of Works, Pat Grafton.

[7]Daly, "Foreword," Rededication Booklet. "The original beauty of this Church has been restored and further enhanced by the work of renovation completed here by the architect, Noel McAree and the Artist, Ray Carroll . . . Mr. McAree has a special feeling for Irish neo-Gothic, and a special talent for revealing the original purity of its perspectives, the majesty of its elevations."

restoration project an energy and a pastoral intelligence that the Booklet records with evident affection. His prose is warm without sentimentality. He describes the people of Keadue as 'great-hearted' and 'mighty people' in the face of impoverished circumstances, a judgement grounded in the experience of having walked the parish at first hand and witnessed their generosity towards the restoration fund.[8]

The most notable single contribution to the renovated church came from Bishop Daly himself, who donated and personally dedicated the new altar in memory of his father, Charles Daly. The Booklet includes a photograph of Charles Daly with a caption that provides a biographical detail available nowhere else in easily accessible sources: he was born in Keadue, 'taught there as a "monitor" and after training in Waterford went to Antrim, where he received his first teaching appointment. He continued to reside in the same parish until his death in 1939.' The altar given by a bishop who would become a Cardinal to the church of his father's native village is a material expression of the ties between the Kilronan diaspora and the community they had left behind. Fr Masterson's reflection on the gift is characteristically direct: 'I know too that the expression of gratitude most acceptable to His Lordship is that he will always be remembered in the prayers and masses of the present and future generations of Keadue people gathered before the altar he has

[8]"Fr. Masterson Says Thanks," Rededication Booklet, p. [3]. Masterson was a native of Moyne, Co. Longford; ordained 1948; served in Calabar (Nigeria), Gortletteragh (Leitrim), Kiltul (Mullahoran, Cavan), Gorteen (Offaly), and Edgeworthstown (Kenya), Ferbane (Offaly), before appointment to Keadue, January 1979.

so generously given to them."[9]

V. The Succession of Parish Priests

The Booklet preserves a systematic record of the parish priests of Kilronan from the mid-nineteenth century to 1981, with photographs and biographical notes that constitute the fullest available account of pastoral succession in the parish. Canon Michael Broder, appointed in May 1857, was the priest who supervised the laying of the foundation stone in August 1860; he was transferred to Killennummery Parish in 1872. His successor after an interval, Canon Pat Reddy; an Offaly man appointed in 1881, oversaw the dedication of the completed church on 8 September 1885 and of St Patrick's Ballyfarnon in 1889. Canon Pat Meehan, a native of Streete in County Westmeath, served for forty-seven years from 1895 to 1942; he baptised, it is said, two generations of Keadue people. Dean Peter Kelly, appointed Parish Priest on 8 September 1942, had an earlier career that included teaching at the Latin School in Moyne and service as Administrator at St Mel's Cathedral; he died in December 1969 with his remains resting in the church grounds. Canon John Lennon, a native of County Longford and President of St Mel's College before his appointment to Kilronan in 1970, was described by Bishop Daly as a personal friend, 'an Irish scholar and . . . profound

[9]Rededication Booklet, p. [3]. Charles Daly was described in the booklet's photograph caption as: "Charles Daly, father of Bishop Daly, who was born in Keadue. He taught there as a 'monitor' and after training in Waterford went to Antrim, where he received his first teaching appointment. He continued to reside in the same parish until his death in 1939."

knowledge of all matters of Irish culture'; he died in November 1978.[10]

The lists of native priests and sisters serving throughout Ireland, Britain, North America, Africa, and Asia that follow the biographies reveal the extraordinary reach of the parish's diaspora vocations. At the time of publication thirteen priests and fourteen sisters who were natives of the parish were serving in locations ranging from Dublin and Boyle to Hong Kong, New Jersey, Arizona, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Middlesex, England. The scale of this dispersal, from a rural parish with a population of 1,230, is a measure of both the depth of the parish's religious culture and the forces of emigration that had scattered its people across the world.[11]

VI. The Parish in Diaspora: Letters, Memories, and the Bonds of Emigration

The most humanly immediate pages of the Booklet are those devoted to the letters—or extracts from letters—received by Fr Masterson during the restoration fund appeal. They arrive from the United States,

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[10]Rededication Booklet, pp. [6–7] (parish priests pages). Canon Michael Broder: appointed to Kilronan May 1857, supervised the laying of the foundation stone 15 August 1860; transferred to Killennummery Parish 1872. Rev. John Monahan D.D.: succeeded Fr. Patrick Sheridan as P.P. in 1881; transferred to Cloghan, Offaly, in some year; died as Dean of the Diocese in Ferbane 1929; had written a history of the diocese. Canon Pat Reddy: an Offalyman; appointed 1881; the church of the Nativity of Our Lady at Keadue was dedicated on 8 September 1885 under his pastorate; St Patrick's Ballyfarnon was dedicated March 1889; many schools were built in the parish; he transferred to Cloghan 1895 and died there 1905.

[11]Rededication Booklet, p. [7]. "Priests In Ireland And Abroad Who Are Natives of The Parish": Fr. Felix Guihen, O.F.M. Cap., Dublin; Fr. Frank Gaffney, New Jersey, U.S.A.; Fr. P. J. Finneran, S.J., Hong Kong; Fr. Tom Daly, Florida; Fr. Robert J. McDermott, Conn., U.S.A.; Fr. Anthony McGirl, Washington; Fr. Dermot Feeney, The Philippines; Fr. John McGuinness, Nigeria; Fr. Peadar Lavin, Boyle; Fr. Gregory McManus, Kenya; Fr. James Bohan, Pullaskeney; Fr. Leo Layden, C.S.Sp., Dublin; Fr. Frank Flynn, Florida.

Australia, Scotland, and England, and they range in register from the formally devotional to the intimately personal. One correspondent—a woman of ninety-six who had come to America in 1905—sends a hundred dollars 'from my mother who is in good health, thank God, and sends her love and best wishes to Keadue and to all the people there.' Another writes that a great-grandfather had departed Keadue in 1854 and become a United States citizen in 1860, the very year the foundation stone was laid.[12]

The collective testimony of these letters discloses the nature of the bond between the emigrant and the parish church. It is a bond forged not merely in nostalgia but in a specific formation of faith: the sacraments received, the masses attended, the canon's voice heard from the pulpit. One writer, describing the experience of Catholic life in America, captures the connection with particular clarity: 'We brought a strong faith and a firm hope in Jesus, and a deep personal love for Him and His blessed mother. All of this great store we received from our parish and from our happy home, a home that was loving, united and prayerful.' The restoration fund, to which these emigrants and their descendants contributed, was in this sense also a contribution to the maintenance of the formation that had made them who they were.[13]

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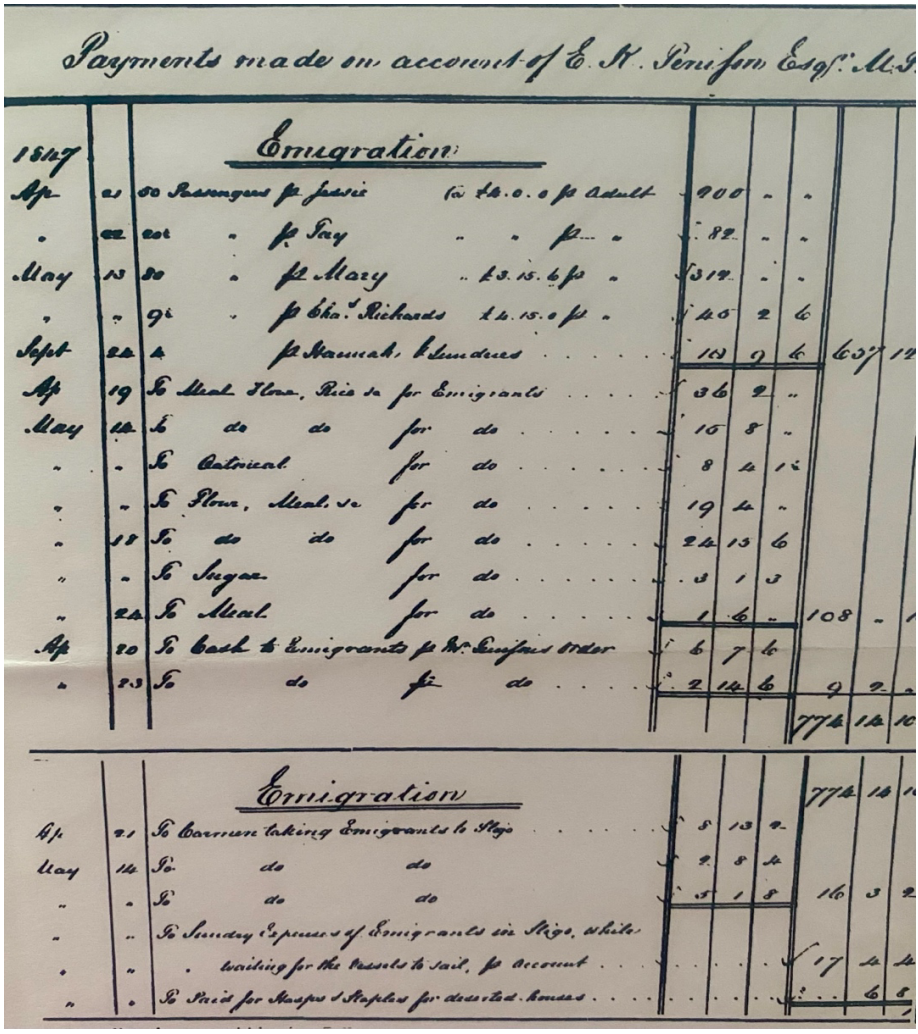
[12]Rededication Booklet, pp. [4–5] (letters pages). The letter extracts include voices from the U.S.A., Australia, Canada, Scotland, and continental Europe. One correspondent, describing herself as "a Keadue woman once removed," was 96 years old and had come to America in 1905. Another recalled a great-grandfather who had departed Keadue in 1854 and become a United States citizen in 1860, the year the foundation stone was laid.

[13]Rededication Booklet, p. [4]. "When we came to America many years ago we were pitchforked from the security of home into the whirlpool of a great city. Looking back now, we wonder how we could have survived as Catholics if we had not brought great treasures with us. We brought a strong faith and a firm hope in Jesus, and a deep personal love for Him and His blessed mother. All of this great store we received from our parish and from our happy home, a home that was loving, united and prayerful."



Payments made on account of E. K. Tenison Esqr. M.P.

1847

Emigration

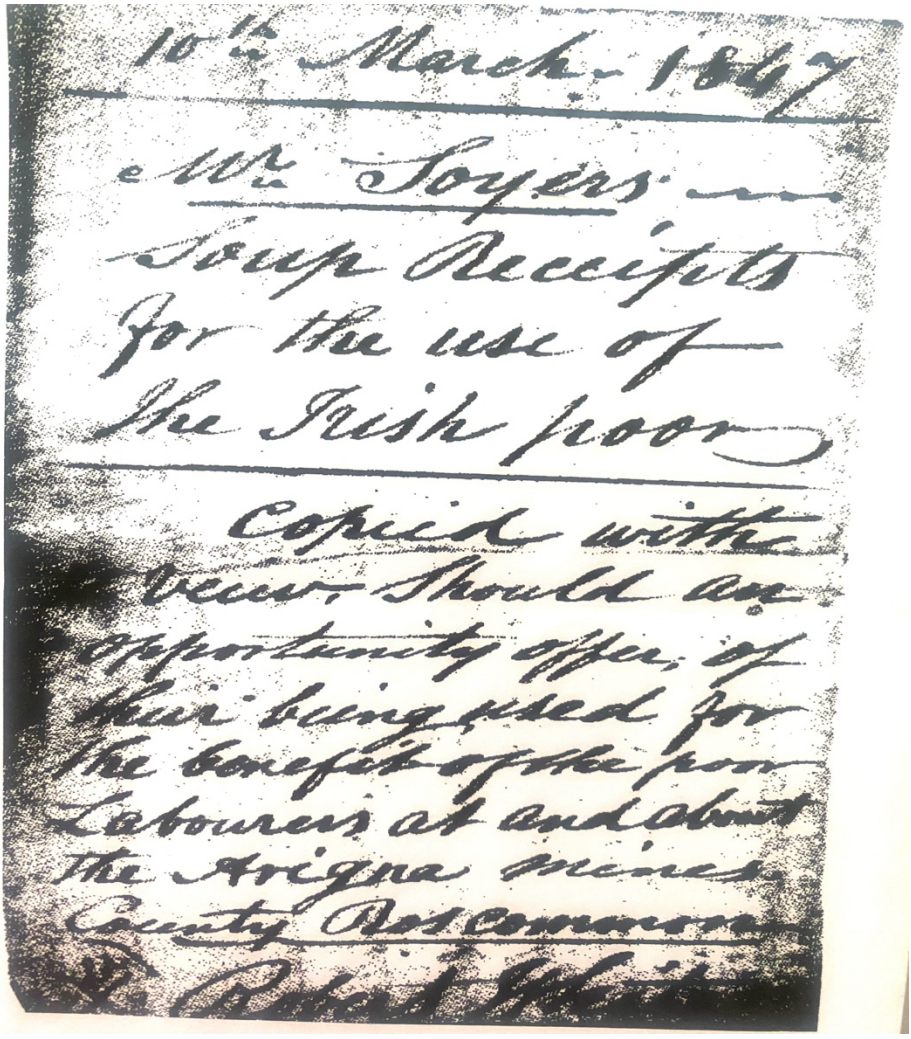
Apr	21	80 Passengers p. Jessie	(@ £4.0.0 p Adult	900	-	-	
"	22	201 " p. Jay	" " p. "	82	-	-	
May	13	80 " p. Mary	" £3.15.6 p "	317	-	-	
"	"	9 " p. Mrs. Richards	£4.15.0 p "	40	2	6	
Sept	22	4 p. Shannah & Lundres		10	9	6	637 12
Apr	19	To Meal Flour, Rice &c for Emigrants		36	2	-	
May	12	" do do for do		15	8	-	
"	"	" Oatmeal for do		8	4	1	
"	"	" Flour, Meal &c for do		19	4	-	
"	18	" do do for do		24	13	6	
"	"	" Sugar for do		3	1	3	
"	24	" Meal for do		1	6	-	108 -
Apr	20	" Cash & Emigrants p Mr. Cunfus Order		6	7	6	
"	23	" do p do		2	14	6	9 2 -
							774 14 10

Emigration

							774 14 1
Apr	21	To Carman taking Emigrants to Sligo		8	13	2	
May	14	" do do		2	8	4	
"	"	" do do		5	1	8	16 3 2
"	"	" Sunday Expenses of Emigrants in Sligo, while					
"	"	" waiting for the vessels to sail, p Account					17 4 4
"	"	" Paid for Hasps & Staples for deserted Houses					6 8

Above is an image of and excerpt taken from the account books of Colonel E.K. Tenison, Kilronan landlord,1847, showing the cost of assistance he gave to some of his tenants to emigrate. The emigrants got the boat to Sligo. They had to bring with them flour, meal, oatmeal, rice and sugar which was paid for by Tenison. The most poignant entry of all is 6 shillings and 8 pence paid for hasps and staples for deserted homes.[14]

[14] Page 32, Rededication Booklet.



A soup recipe from Robert White in 1847 for 'the benefit of the poor Labourers at Arigna'. Source unknown.

Picture taken on the occasion of the press conference in March, 1980, to launch the fund-raising campaign. Included in picture are: Bishop Daly, Dr. Gibbons, Rev. J. P. Masterson and Rev. J. Enright.

KEADUE NATIONAL SCHOOL — Senior Room Pupils, 1949, with Principal, Mr. P. J. Guckian.
Left to right (back row)—Annie Quinn, Rita McCormack, Mena Duignan, May Scanlon, Sheila Kelly, Nuala Kelly, Nuala Donlon, Marie Neary, Maureen Sands.
Left to right (middle row)—Mary Kelly, Myra Leydon, May Bruen, Maeve Doyle, Bridie Kelly, Raymond McManus, Seamus McCabe, John Doyle, Eamon Woods.
Left to right (front row)—Noel Kelly, Francis McCormack (R.I.P.), Tommy Kelly, Manus McManus, Jim Shivnan, Michael Tynan, Noel O'Connor (R.I.P.).

St. Ronan's Fife and Drum Band, Keadue — Photograph taken at Garden Party in Parochial Grounds, Drumshanbo, 1952.
Left to right (back row)—Pat Healy, John McDermott, Tom Noone (R.I.P.), John Farrell, Jimmy Leydon (R.I.P.), Jim Nolan, Charlie Duignan, Bandmaster (R.I.P.), John Quinn, John Guihen, Joe White, John Beirne, Pakie Noone, Frank Scanlon, John Mulvey.
Left to right (front row) — Pat Molloy, Pakie Forde, Mickie Brady, Corney McShera, John Doyle, John McShera, Brian Farrell, Michael Kelly, John Gaffney, Paddy McManus.

Some Keadue Parishoners, 1940s, 50s, and 80s. Rededication Booklet

Among the most poignant contributions in the Booklet is the memoir 'Keadue from Albany' by the late Father Henry Tansey. Tansey had been baptised in Keadue Church in early January 1922, the eighth and last child of the Stonepark family. His letter to Fr Masterson, dated 21 December 1980, expressed his hope to be home for a holiday in 1981. He was killed in a tragic traffic accident on 25 January 1981, within a month of writing, while on the point of moving to a new appointment in California. The Editor of an Albany paper who interviewed him shortly before his death recorded him saying: 'my personal involvement with people here over seventeen years is what I'll miss most. It's since I came here that I've come to understand fully that it is through involvement with others that we experience in our lives the gift of God's presence.' His remains were brought home and rest in Kilronan.[15]

VII. Keadue from Seattle, Hong Kong, and Albany: The Missionary Dimension

Three substantial essays by priests serving abroad give the Booklet an unusual international dimension. Father A. McGirl's contribution 'Keadue from Seattle' recalls that he became a child of God in the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady when he was seven days old, on 12 July 1919. He provides a precise architectural note—the foundation stone of Keadue Church was laid by Bishop Kilduff on 15 August 1860, the Parish Priest then being Canon Michael Broder; the church was dedicated on 8 September 1885 by Bishop Woodlock—and records that

[15]Henry Tansey, "Keadue from Albany," Rededication Booklet, pp. [10–11]. Tansey was baptised in Keadue Church in early January 1922, the eighth and last child of the Stonepark family. He was killed in a tragic traffic accident on 25 January 1981, within a month of writing the letter to Fr Masterson that the Booklet reproduces. His letter was dated 21 December 1980.

Arigna Church was opened and dedicated on 8 December 1830 as the Church of the Immaculate Conception. His memoir is also a portrait of Canon Meehan, who 'often asked me to his place at night to watch the moon and stars through the telescope. He was sharing his world with me and as a lad I couldn't tell him that I wasn't much interested in astronomy. Instead, I would pretend to see constellations which I couldn't see at all just to please him.'[16]

Father Paddy Finneran S.J., writing from Hong Kong, recalls Canon Meehan as the dominating figure of his boyhood Keadue: 'The Canon was a character. I remember he had the first car in Keadue—a "Tin Lizzy." Often it stalled on him, and he would commandeer the nearest person to swing the starter and woo the vehicle.' He describes 'Lasair Well' as the great event of the year, where the Arigna Fife and Drum Band played and trees and bushes around the well were hung with beads and bits of cloth as signs of gratitude for cures. The essay closes with an act of solidarity: 'I congratulate you all on the great work of restoring and renewing our dear old Parish Church—and from Fr. Masterson's letter, I see the people of Keadue and all Kilronans, at home and abroad, have contributed most generously.'[17]

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[16]A. McGirl, "Keadue from Seattle," Rededication Booklet, pp. [12–13]. Fr McGirl records: "On July 12, 1919, the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady became very special to me because it is there that I became a child of God when I was seven days old." He also records: "Arigna Church was opened and dedicated on the 8th December, 1830 and was named the Church of the Immaculate Conception." The Foundation Stone of Keadue Church was laid by Bishop Kilduff on 15th August 1860; the Parish Priest was then Canon Michael Broder.

[17]Paddy Finneran, S.J., "Keadue from Hong Kong," Rededication Booklet, pp. [14–15]. Fr Finneran recalls Canon Meehan as a memorable figure: "The Canon was a character. I remember he had the first car in Keadue — a 'Tin Lizzy'." He describes "Lasair Well" as the "big event of the year," with the Arigna Fife and Drum Band among the attractions.

VIII. St Lasair, the Holy Well, and the Deep Memory of the Parish

The essay on St Lasair that occupies pages twenty-four and twenty-five of the Booklet is one of the most vivid pieces of local cultural history it contains. It opens with an account of emigrants from north Roscommon carrying Lasair's clay on their journeys to Scotland and America: 'Their old folk often told them that once a Donegal woman threw some of this blessed clay on raging waves and that the ocean became calm.' The Pattern Day at Lasair Well is described in detail: crowds gathering from as far as Drumshanbo, the narrow-gauge railway running an excursion from Ballinamore to Arigna along the mountain side, the road to Keadue choc-a-bloc with people, side cars, traps, and carts, the stalls selling can-sweets and currant-biscuits, ginger-bread and sugar-stick, liquorice and Peggy's legs.[18]

The essay also preserves a remarkable account of the annual faction fights that accompanied Pattern Day: the McManus and Gaffney families fighting each other with loaded sticks, a feature of the occasion whose blend of piety and violence was characteristic of pre-Famine Irish popular culture. Canon Meehan, it is recorded, preached against Lasair from the pulpit, calling it 'my holy mountain' and denouncing the 'Ballinamore bullocks' who came to hang rags on the trees. 'If you come to Lasair,' Canon Meehan said one Sunday, 'come to pray; if you come to court, court but for God's sake don't mix them.' Lasair has survived, the essay concludes, for twelve hundred years: a continuity of popular

[18]Rededication Booklet, p. [24–25] (Lasair pages). "On the Sunday within the octave of September 8th a great crowd will gather for Mass at the well. Seventy years ago it was different. Pattern day was a big day in Kilronan and in the parishes around." The essay also records the annual faction fights between the McManus and Gaffney families at Lasair.

devotion outlasting ecclesiastical architecture, political upheaval, and the entire period of emigration and loss that the rest of the Booklet documents.

IX. Land, Power, and Resistance: The Kingston Evictions of the 1880s

The decision to include an account of the Kingston Evictions in a church rededication booklet reveals the extent to which the Keadue community in 1981 understood its ecclesiastical and social history as inseparable. The article, by Dr Hugh Gibbons, covers the decade 1880 to 1890, when the completion of the building of the two churches in the parish of Kilronan coincided with hardship and poverty for many of the parishioners. Agricultural prices were bad, Lord Kingston's agent Jack Tatlow had encouraged tenants to improve their holdings and then trebled the rents, and the tenants, supported by the Irish Land League and the 'No Rent' campaign, refused to pay.

In July 1886 eight families were evicted in the Logh Allen–Cornagee area—Thomas Lynch, Patrick Redican, Thomas McPartlan, James Rynn, John Maguire, Lackey Beirne, Bryan Scanlon, and Mary Cassidy—and by February 1887 it was announced that forty further evictions would take place. To carry out those evictions, between two hundred and two hundred and fifty policemen were assembled in the area each time. The announcement of the bailiffs and police was made by the blowing of horns in the valley. The principal clerical support for the tenants came from Fr Reddy, Parish Priest of Kilronan, and from the English landowner and reformer Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, whose personal interest in the Kilronan evictions took a remarkable course: he eventually

committed himself to prison in Galway.[19] The Roscommon Herald commented that 'They made every sacrifice they were asked and they bore their fate uncomplainingly as men of the tenantry of Ireland.

X. Arigna: Church, Mines, and Community

The section of the Booklet devoted to Arigna offers material that enriches and complements the account of the iron and coal works given elsewhere in this volume. Fr Leo Layden's essay 'Kilronan' records a detail not found in the standard published sources: 'there is some evidence that the iron mines of Sir Charles Coote at Arigna were destroyed in the rebellion of 1641.' The essay also provides a description of the Arigna church—the Church of the Immaculate Conception—whose approach is marked by an outside stairway that 'adds much dignity to the whole building.' The church was dedicated in 1830, built on land donated by the Arigna Iron and Coal Company; the adjoining presbytery was the original two-storey house directly across the road from Arigna Hall.[20]

The memoir 'My Days in Arigna' by Fr Pat Kearney gives the most vivid surviving account of the coal-mining community at its wartime peak.

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[19]Hugh Gibbons, "The Kingston Evictions," Rededication Booklet, pp. [17–18]. Dr Gibbons records that 200 to 250 policemen were assembled for each eviction. In July 1886 eight families were evicted in the Logh Allen-Cornagee area: Thomas Lynch, Patrick Redican, Thomas McPartlan, James Rynn, John Maguire, Lackey Beirne, Bryan Scanlon, and Mary Cassidy. By February 1887, forty further evictions were announced. "Were it not for the intervention of Mr. Blunt in the Kilronan evictions it is difficult to tell what would have been the end."

[20]Leo Layden, C.S.Sp., "Kilronan," Rededication Booklet, pp. [20–21]. Fr Layden records: "the history of mining in Arigna has still to be written . . . there is some evidence that the iron mines of Sir Charles Coote at Arigna were destroyed in the rebellion of 1641." He also notes that the former church in Keadue stood on the site where St Ronan's Hall now stands.

Transferred from Legan, County Longford, to Arigna in October 1942, Kearney found himself in a place utterly unlike the tranquil pastoral setting he had left: ‘At that time about 600 men were employed in coal mining and coal haulage in Arigna. Heavy lorries and pans passed my doorstep all day on their way to and from “Spine Kop” mine. The funicular haulage deposited “bucketful after bucketful” from Derrinavoggy mine, in the coalyard bunker. Meantime the factory hummed quietly in the background. Each good old “Narrow Gauge” train steamed out from the coal siding with its rake of loaded waggons.’ The essay confirms that the church was a focal point for this workforce: coal miners with blackened faces and acetylene lamps attended Sunday Mass, and the curate’s residence was situated right beside the Arigna coal yard.[21]

XI. The Musical Parish: Josie McDermott and the Tradition of O’Carolan

The final substantive essay in the Booklet, ‘Josie McDermott’ by S. McDonagh, situates the church rededication within the musical life of a parish that understood itself as holding a continuous tradition stretching back beyond O’Carolan. Josie McDermott of Coolmine, Ballyfarnon, musician, singer, balladeer, adjudicator, and television personality, is presented as the living embodiment of a heritage that the Kilronan–Crossna–Geevagh area had always maintained at a high standard, even before the time of the great bard himself. The essay traces the tradition

[21]Pat Kearney, "My Days in Arigna," Rededication Booklet, pp. [22–23]. Fr Kearney was transferred from Legan, Co. Longford, to Arigna in October 1942. "At that time about 600 men were employed in coal mining and coal haulage in Arigna. Heavy lorries and pans passed my doorstep all day on their way to and from 'Spine Kop' mine."

through the MacDermott Roe family at Ballyfarnon, who educated O'Carolan's harp teacher, and through an unbroken succession of local musicians including John Donagher of Kilmactranny, the O'Malley family, and the Guerins who had lived adjacent to Alderford.[22]

McDermott's account of the parish's musical richness confirms the claim that Keadue 'would go as far as to say that you would not get a better place in Ireland than this particular part of the North of Connaught for traditional music and song.' At various periods there were two Ceili Bands simultaneously—one in Arigna and one in Keadue—and later a Pipers' Band. The essay captures the way in which music, faith, and community were woven together in the parish: the O'Carolan Harp Festival, the Pattern Day at Lasair Well with its bands and dancing, and the Sunday Mass at which the organist and choir sustained a standard of musical worship that parishioners from Hong Kong to Albany remembered throughout their lives.

XII. Conclusion: A Document of Community, Diaspora, and Memory

The Rededication Booklet of the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady at Keadue is, as this essay has tried to show, a document of far greater historical density than its modest format suggests. It contains within its twenty-seven pages an architectural history, a pastoral succession, a

[22]S. McDonagh, "Josie McDermott," Rededication Booklet, pp. [26–27]. "Kilronan is a parish steeped in folklore and tradition. Music is one of its greatest heritages and in this article, well-known musician, singer, balladeer, adjudicator, T.V. personality, and composer, Josie McDermott, talks about the art of handing down the music in a parish which can boast about its traditions even before the time of the great bard, Turlough O'Carolan."

sociological portrait of emigration, an account of agrarian resistance, a history of an industrial community, and a record of living musical tradition. It brings together voices from five continents — Keadue itself, Albany, Seattle, Hong Kong, Longford, Dublin, Durham — and braids them into a single testimony of attachment to a place, a church, and a way of life rooted in faith.

For this volume, the Booklet carries a particular significance through the inscription in the front cover. That Fr Masterson should have handed a copy to the author of this book in 1985 places the document within the pattern of connection between north Roscommon and County Durham that runs through these essays as a whole. The McManus family of Durham were, in that gesture, positioned exactly where the Booklet's letter-writers had placed themselves: as members of a dispersed community whose bond with the parish of Kilronan was maintained not by proximity but by faith, memory, and the deliberate cultivation of ties across the Irish Sea. The church at Keadue, rebuilt in red sandstone by J. J. McCarthy in the 1860s and renewed in 1981 by Noel McAree and Ray Carroll, stands as the material embodiment of that bond—and the Booklet, handed to the author is a paper record of it.

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PART FIVE

The Coalfield

Strangers in a Coal Valley: Social, Religious, and Economic Life among Irish Emigrants to Crook and Billy Row, County Durham c. 1840–1890

I. Introduction

From a peasant farming and labouring situation in Ireland, environmentally, socially and economically induced change, together with the more immediate catastrophe of the Great Famine, combined to produce a substantial migration to the coalfields of the north-east of England. The displacement was radical: the adaptation required by the new industrial environment was, in the terms employed by cultural anthropologists, both multi-linear and comprehensive, touching every dimension of social and economic life. The Census returns for Crook and Billy Row, together with the surviving records of the Auckland Poor Law Union and the registers of the Catholic mission at Crook, allow this adaptation to be traced in some detail for the period from the 1840s.[1]

The Census of 1841 provides the earliest systematic baseline for measuring the Irish presence in the Durham coalfield.[2] The impact of Irish emigration on the volume of Catholic parishioners in nineteenth-century England was phenomenal. Of the 100,000 Catholics in England in 1770, a large proportion were recusant gentry and their dependents; by the time of the 1851 Census, the Catholic population of England and

[1]Steward, J. (1955), *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press; Fox, R. (1967), *Kinship and Marriage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For a local perspective see: McManus, M. (2023) From Townland to Township: The Complex Evolution of a Dissipative Famine-Irish Community in County Durham. Independently published.
[2]Smith, H. J. (1974), *'Crook and Billy Row in 1851: An Analysis of the Census Returns'*, University of Durham, Department of Extra Mural Studies, p. 8.

Wales had grown to approximately 900,000, the overwhelming majority of the increase attributable to Irish immigration. In the north-east, the increase was particularly marked. R. J. Cooter's analysis of the Irish Catholic population of Durham and Newcastle shows a rapid expansion in the decades after the Famine.[3] The mission at Crook was established to serve this growing community: the Northern Catholic Calendar[4] for 1859 records that it had been placed on a proper footing by the early 1850s, with a resident priest appointed by the early part of that decade,[5] and a programme of church-building and school provision carried forward through the following years. The mission's first proper school was noted in the same source as having been opened by 1859.[6]

Work was, of course, easy for the newly arriving Irish to find at Crook. But there will always be social exceptions. Some women were left without breadwinners; single mothers, widows, women with husbands unable to work. One difficulty concerning the provision of poor relief for Irish emigrants to Britain in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century was the legal question of settlement. Under the law of settlement and removal, a pauper could be removed to the parish or union of their legal settlement, which for the Irish-born meant removal to Ireland. Major ports of arrival felt this pressure most acutely. The Liverpool Poor Law Union, in particular, strained under the weight of Irish famine refugees in 1847, and the Thirteenth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners recorded in detail the scale of the problem at

[3]Cooter, R. J. (1975), "On Calculating the Nineteenth Century Irish Catholic Population of Durham and Newcastle," Northern Catholic History, 2, pp. 16–25.
[4]*The Northern Catholic Calendar*, Historical Sketches of Missions – Crook, 1859, p. 53.
[5]*The Northern Catholic Calendar*, Historical Sketches of Missions – Crook, 1859, p. 53.
[6]Bishop Auckland Herald, November 1st, 1854.

that port.[7]

II. The Auckland Poor Law Union

In the 1800s, Crook and Billy Row Township was part of the Auckland Poor Law Union, for which no Poor Law records survive for the period before the later 1850s. The earlier records of the Auckland Union that do survive; notably the minutes of guardians for 1845 to 1849, are held at the Durham County Record Office. Additional relevant material survives in two further collections: the Ddu2 deposit,[8] which relates to the Derwent Union, and the Da 679 deposit containing the Minutes of Guardians for 1845 to 1849. The administrative records of the Crook mission itself are preserved in the DCRO under the CS/2 reference.[9]

The earliest Auckland Union Minutes of Guardians available date from February 1863. Some idea of the cost of maintaining Irish paupers at the Auckland Union workhouse may be gained from the minutes of that period. The Board was not unsympathetic to genuine cases of destitution, but it was also keenly aware of the financial burden that Irish removals placed upon the ratepayers of the union, and it was prepared to act to reduce that burden where the law permitted.[10] At a meeting of the Guardians on 5 March 1863, the question of Irish paupers in the workhouse was formally considered. Two weeks later, on 2 April 1863, the Board returned to the subject, and further resolutions were passed

[7]Austin (1847), BPP (HC) 1847, (873) XXVII, Thirteenth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, Appendix No. 8: Austin, Report on the Relief of the Irish Poor in Liverpool.
[8]Durham County Record Office (hereafter DCRO), /U/WE/463.
[9]DCRO/U/Ddu2.
[10]DCRO/U/au/1.

regarding the disposal of Irish cases.[11]

At a later meeting of the Auckland Guardians in 1863, they agreed to write to the two members of the Southern Division of Durham County in Parliament urging support for an amendment to the Irish Poor Law that would have facilitated the return of Irish paupers to their country of origin at public expense. The resolution was carried at the meeting of 28 May 1863. By the meeting of 11 June 1863, the Board was pursuing specific cases of removal more actively.[12]

In June 1863, at least one of the Guardians felt the need for action in another Irish case. Mr. Kellett gave notice that he would move at the next meeting for the removal of Catholic Irish paupers who had not acquired a settlement in the union. A very large crowd gathered outside the workhouse on the day of the relevant meeting, drawing attention to the plight of those threatened with removal. The minutes of 25 June 1863 record the proceedings in some detail, and those of 9 July 1863 follow up several individual cases arising from the same episode.[13] By 17 September 1863, the Board was reporting on the outcomes of its removal orders.[14]

At the beginning of the following year, 1864, the fate of the Eustace children, still residing in the workhouse at the request of the Board, was settled: they were removed to Ireland, along with several other

[11]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 28th. April 1864.
[12]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 28th. May 1863.
[13]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 25th. June 1863.
[14]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 9th. July 1863.

workhouse inmates, following formal resolutions at the meetings of 4 February 1864. Further removals followed: the minutes of 17 March 1864 and 31 March 1864 record additional cases.[15]

These removals were followed by others in the following year: Jane Stafford, Bridget Heapby, John Murphy and his family, and Elizabeth Kennedy among them. The minutes of April 1865, September 1865,[16] and the second meeting of September 1865; as well as a further meeting of 28 September 1865[17] and the September meeting recorded separately, all contain material relating to Irish removal cases. By the winter of 1865–66, the issue had not abated: the minutes of 18 January 1866[18] and 4 January 1866 continue the record of removals and related expenditure.[19]

If we look for Irish names amongst the out-door relief claimants in the Auckland Union, it is clear that the Irish were not so overwhelmingly represented as might be supposed given the scale of immigration into the district. The medical certificates produced to the Board for out-door relief tell a more nuanced story. The minutes of 5 January 1863[20] and 16 April 1863 both contain lists of outdoor relief cases that include a number of Irish-surnamed claimants, and the minute of 10 December 1863[21] rounds off the year's record of such cases.

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[15]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 4th. February 1864.
[16]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated April 1865.
[17]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 28th. September 1865.
[18]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 14th. September 1865.
[19]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 14th. September 1865.
[20]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians, medical certificates produced.
[21]DCRO/U/au/1 – Minutes of Guardians dated 5th. January 1863.

III. Employment and Age: The 1851 and 1861 Censuses

At the time of the 1851 Census there were a total of 108 employed Irish-born persons in Crook; 99 males and 9 females. By the Census of 1861 the number of employed Irish-born had risen to 285. The distribution by age group is set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Employment of Irish-born residents by age, 1851 and 1861

Age	1851	1861
12–20	24	36
21–30	53	124
31–40	23	72
41–50	4	38
51–60	4	6
61–80	0	4
Unknown	0	5
Total	108	285

In the Irish working community at Crook and Billy Row it can be seen that young working men aged 21–30 predominated. The improvement between the two census years reflects the growth of the mining industry in the district and the increasing integration of the Irish workforce into the local economy. The relatively small number of Irish-born women in employment in 1851 reflects both the nature of the available work, predominantly coal-mining and heavy labouring, and the domestic circumstances of many of the female migrants.[22]

[22]Ibid. Smith (1975), p. 27.

IV. Marriage and Community

If we consider the marital status of the Irish-born at Crook, what is striking about the figures in Table 2 is the contrast between the large number of unmarried Irish-born males in 1851 and the much smaller number of unmarried Irish-born females in the same year. This imbalance reflects the character of the initial migration: young men arriving alone to find work in the mines, with families and potential wives remaining in Ireland or following at a later date.

Table 2
Marital status of the Irish-born population (aged 16 and over), 1851 and 1861

	1851 Married	1851 Unmarried	1851 Widowed	1861 Married	1861 Unmarried	1861 Widowed
Males	31	67	1	147	122	12
Females	19	10	3	133	17	15
Total	**50**	**77**	**4**	**280**	**139**	**27**

The predominant age group amongst unmarried Irish-born males was between 18 and 30. If we make the assumption that the majority of those listed as unmarried in the 1851 Census subsequently married, either women already resident in the district or women who arrived as part of the continuing migration stream, the dramatic increase in the number of married Irish-born by 1861 becomes explicable. The community was consolidating itself across the decade.

V. The Catholic Young Men's Society at Crook

From available records, it is known that a branch of the Catholic Young Men's Society, dedicated to St Joseph, was active at Crook by the 1880s,

though its surviving records are sparse. The Society provided a structured social environment for young Catholic men in a town whose principal leisure outlet, the public house, was regarded by the clergy and the Catholic middle class as a serious moral hazard.

In September 1886, Drysdale Hall, the diocesan headquarters of the Catholic Young Men's Society, was opened in Newcastle by Bishop Bewick. It was shortly afterwards described as having reading rooms and lending libraries, and sponsoring concerts, lectures, and theatrical entertainments as alternatives to licensed premises. The Society's branches throughout the diocese were expected to follow this model. As well as opening reading rooms and lending libraries to parishioners who were prepared to pay subscriptions, branches ran social evenings and debates. Amongst several presentations to the Conference by branch members, Brother J. King of the Leeds branch presented the following address, which is preserved in the Newcastle City Library:[23]

> *'The necessity for the establishment of Young Men's Societies is perceptible to the most casual observer passing through the manufacturing and commercial districts of England. Young men from the country districts flock to these places, and are thrown suddenly, without friends or advisers, and with the temptations of a large town on every side. It is here that the Catholic Young Men's Society can do its most beneficent work.'*

The opportunities provided by this Society for social evenings as

[23]Newcastle City Library, Ref. Local Tracts, D. 74, Miscellaneous, quoted in *Northern Catholic History*, No. 26, pp. 31–32, Autumn 1987.

alternatives to licensed premises, where Irish Catholic men might meet in respectable company, were particularly valuable in a mining village such as Crook. The young men of Crook, together with young ladies from other outlying villages, would have found in such gatherings one of the principal means by which courtship and marriage across the community was facilitated.

VI. St Joseph's Club at Crook

A book relating to the accounts of the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady and St Cuthbert, Crook, contains the only recorded minutes of the St Joseph's Young Catholic Men's Society at Crook; held at the Durham County Record Office. The Society was clearly thriving in 1880, as is evident from a list of the eighty members who signed a receipt dated 22 February 1882.[24]

At seven o'clock on the evening of Monday, 6 February 1882, a General Meeting of St Joseph's Club convened in the Playroom of the Church. The following resolutions were passed:

Resolved - to keep up the club of St. Joseph.
Proposed and Seconded - that Edward McCabe of Wilson Street, Crook, be Secretary of St. Joseph's Club. Carried.
Proposed and Seconded - that the contribution be made quarterly in advance. Carried.
Proposed - that the contribution be at the rate of one shilling per quarter, to be paid in the first month of each quarter. Carried.

[24]DCRO RC/Cro9/1.

Proposed and Seconded - that the contribution be paid on the 1st Saturday in the first month of each quarter at 6 o'clock p.m. to the Secretary at the Club Room. Carried.
Proposed - that the first instalment be paid on Saturday, Feb. 11th and on Saturday, 18th Feb. at 6 p.m. to the Secretary at the Club Room. Carried.
Proposed and Seconded - that a committee be formed forthwith. Carried. Also that the government of the club be in the hands of the committee.
Proposed and seconded - that the committee consist of the President, Secretary and 8 members. Carried.
Proposed and seconded - that the members of the committee be chosen at this meeting from amongst the members present and viva voce. Carried.
Proposed and seconded and carried - that the following persons be members of the committee: Pat Bradley (Grahamsley), James Murtha (Helmington Row), Martin Doherty, Michael Bradley, Michael Connors, Thomas Murphy, Michael Gallagher, James McDonald.
Proposed and seconded - that the Secretary sit from six o'clock till seven o'clock p.m. on Saturday next Feb. 11th at the Club Room for the convenience of those wishing to join. Carried.
Proposed and carried, with the hearty sanction of the President - that an entertainment be held next Monday 13th Feb. in the Club Room.
The minutes, signed by the President, Father Augustine Pippet, closed with a vote of thanks and, as recorded, 'a hearty rendering of "God Save the Queen."'

A Committee Meeting held the following day was a 'close of the year' meeting, attended by all members under the Reverend Father Pippet. The

following resolutions were passed:

Proposed and carried - that the following papers be procured for the use of the members: Daily Chronicle, Shamrock, Young Ireland, Irish Weekly, The Tablet.
Proposed and carried - that certain useful books belonging to the Library be newly bound as soon as the funds will allow; and kept in good repair in the future.

The collection in the Club library included Volumes 1–8 of the Popular Educator and the Pickwick Papers. These had been supplied, with other volumes, by Father Pippet. The choice of reading matter is significant: the Popular Educator was a publication aimed at self-improvement among the working classes, and its presence in the library; alongside the Irish nationalist press represented by the Shamrock and Young Ireland, suggests a community that was simultaneously engaged in the project of English working-class self-improvement and in the maintenance of a distinctly Irish cultural and political identity. The Tablet, a Catholic weekly of the more conservative stamp, rounded out a library that served a membership spread across the full range of Irish Catholic opinion in County Durham.

That the facilities in the Reading Room were used by club members is evident from the volume of gas supplied to warm the room between November and January: four shillings were spent on gas for this purpose, suggesting regular evening use throughout the winter months.[25]

[25]Newspaper Press Directory, 1884.

VII. Conclusion

The brief foregoing glimpse at a small Irish community in west Durham in the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrates how documentary sources of varied character; Census returns, poor law minutes, mission registers, and a single club account book, can together illuminate the social history of a community whose members left few other traces in the written record. From the mass migration of the Famine years to the consolidation of the 1860s and 1870s, and thence to the organised social life represented by St Joseph's Club in the 1880s, the Irish of Crook and Billy Row moved from the condition of 'strangers'; disruptive, suspect, and liable to removal, to that of established parishioners, members of formal associations, and participants in the civic life of the Durham coalfield.

The tension between Irish cultural identity and English working-class assimilation is visible throughout: in the choice of newspapers for the Club library, in the faction fights and kinship feuds recorded in the constabulary returns, in the Guardians' minutes that show both the harshness of the removal regime and the occasional sympathy of individual officers. The McManus family and others whose names recur in the registers of Kilronan parish and the mines of Arigna, County Roscommon, would have recognised in Crook a world simultaneously foreign and familiar: shaped by the same industrial forces that were transforming Ireland's coalfields, but anchored in the same faith, the same communal bonds, and the same stubborn insistence on remembering where they had come from.

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About the Author

Michael McManus was born in 1946 in Durham City, UK. He has led a distinguished and varied career, serving for fifty years in Public Service. He served as an Airman in the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm during the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1971, he joined the Durham Constabulary, dedicating nearly three decades to policing before retiring in 1999 and transitioning to academia at Durham University, where he taught Sociology and Criminology in a part-time capacity from 1999 to 2015 and was module leader in the Policing Module and the Researching Crime Module. He was awarded a BA (Hons) Degree from New College, Durham and a PhD from Durham University. He holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning from Durham University.